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This slot-machine bank cannot be bought. **There is just one way to get it**—send $1.00 for 70 chocolate bars and we will include **the bank free!** Made of **sheet** metal with regular locked door so you can open, remove money and refill with chocolate. On the front is a slot to drop coin in, and a glass window showing bars. Red, yellow and green. Send a dollar bill ($1.00) for the 70 bars and get the bank **FREE.**

EXTRA! If you hurry, we'll add, without cost, our big 1937 600-page novelty catalog, 3500 illustrations.

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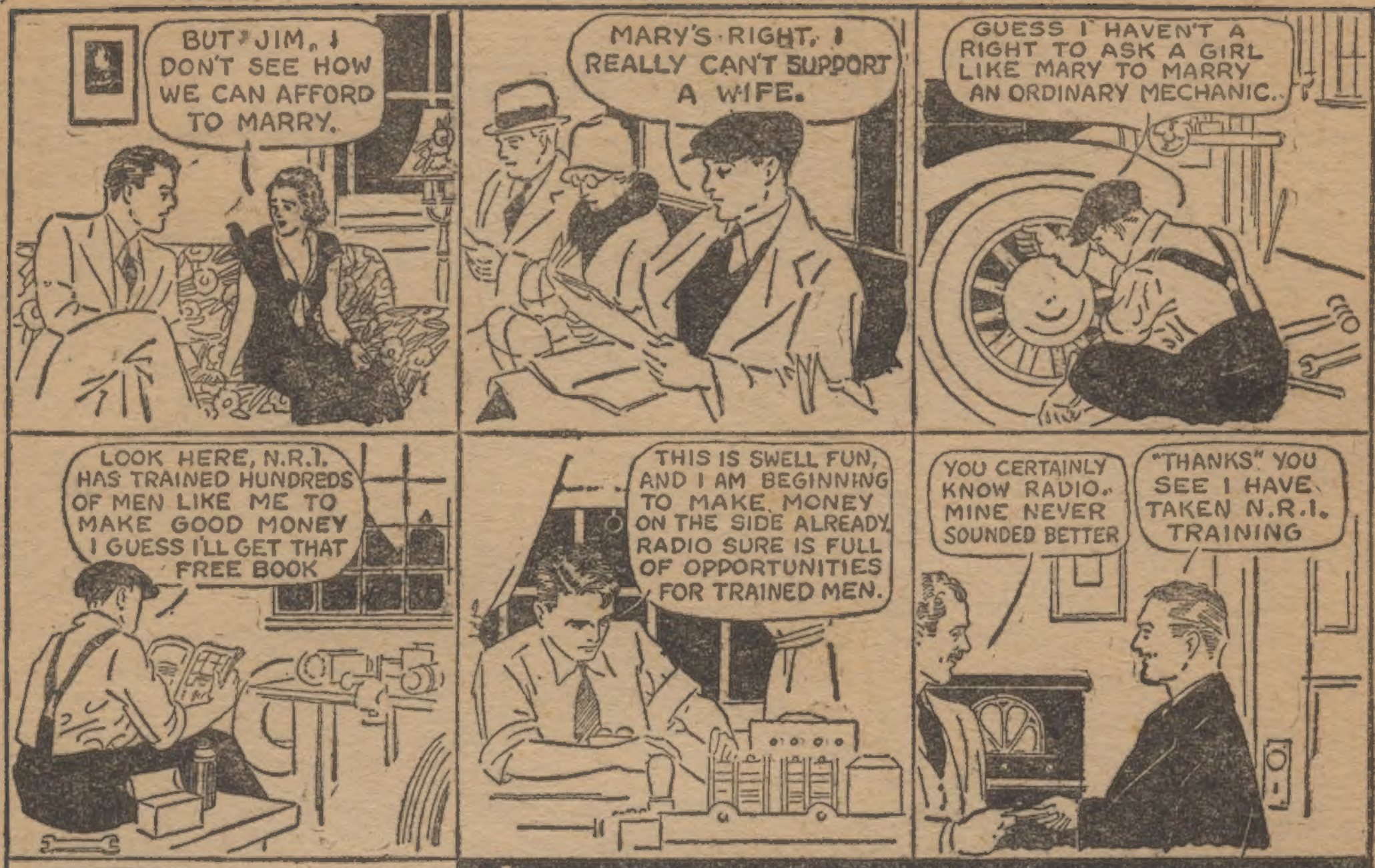


I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Your Spare Time For A* GOOD RADIO JOB

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs; how to cash in quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special Radio equipment to give you practical experience—show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7K09,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined station WMPC. where I am now Chief Operator."—HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

Own Business Pays $300 a Month

"I now have my own Radio business which shows three hundred dollars a month profit—thanks again to National Radio."—FRANK T. REESE, 39 N. Felton St. Philadelphia, Penna.

Earned $50 First Month in Spare Time.

"I knew nothing about Radio. After four lessons I began servicing Radios, earning $50 the first month. Last winter I made as high as $100 a month in spare time."—G. F. WALTON, 808 West Olney Road, Norfolk, Va.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7K09,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

WELL, WELL, fellas an' gals, looked like this yere old month'd never git 'round where we'd all git gatherin' clost ag'in 'side this yere ol' BRANDIN' FIRE an' grippin' each other's hands onct more. I shore gits lonesome, waitin' fer yuh.

Month's a long while when th' heart is honin' fer comp'ny, meanin' comp'ny o' th' right sort, 'course; an' that comp'ny's jest what we got in our AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Seems like ev'ry new member what writes in tuh us—an' shore's a might big slew what's doin' that come ev'ry mail—is jest one more swell hombre or dandy gal we all wants tuh know.

A Smart-Sized Family

Reminds me o' th' time Jess Lawler an' me war doin' our turn ridin' range one time down below Yellowstone Park, in th' Jackson's Hole country, for th' ol' LT Ranch, owned by fella named Jules Berry, what never war no better boss.

Jules, he had built up a right smart-sized family—wife, seven kids, coupla thousand white-faces, 'bout a hunderd good cow-hosses, six-seven huntin' dawgs, Chinee cook an', fer good measure, had done hired our ol' pal, Lod Littleton, as chuck-waggin cookee. Never war no man what could dish out better chuck-waggin grub than Lod, an' when, some years later, he war hanged by public spirited citizens o' Dogtown who aimed tuh give 'im a good rest from overwork in rustlin' steers an' calves, we shore felt his loss ev'ry time we rode up tuh th' chuck-waggin fer meals.

Fer a durned long while we all jest usta eat an' talk o' Lod an' wish he war present with his smile, whiskers, big arms an' merry yarns 'bout th' range while we et, squattin' 'round grinnin', listenin' tuh his durned lies an' feelin' he war wuth all th' dinero ol' Jules war payin' 'im.

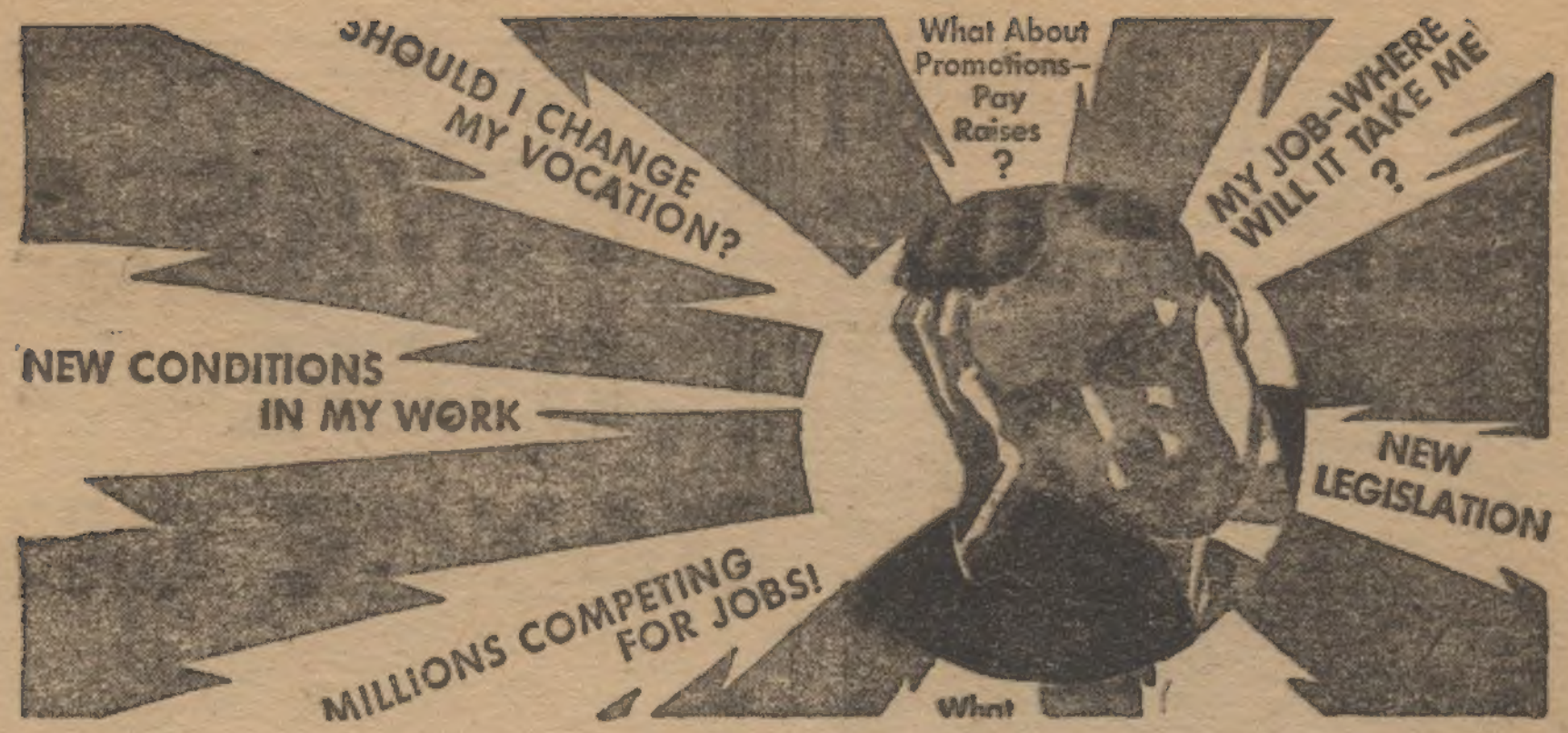
Lod war shore comp'ny o' th' right sort, a hull danged crowd all in hisself, an' his li'l mistake 'bout recognizin' calves as his own an' shovin' his brand on their hips, musta been when Lod war losin' his youth an' gittin' feeble-minded. Puhsonal, I never knowed 'im to steal a durned thing from anybody, 'cept time us fellas pulled off that stunt up in Rawhide on a payday. Swipin' th' parson's tile hat caused all th' trouble that time, an' Lod shoulda knowed better, an' so should th' rest uv us. But it war a fine crowd, a swell party, an' ended by our gittin' Hank Martin married off proper tuh one uh old Jules' pretty daughters afore evenin' come 'round.

A Top-Hand

Yuh see, some o' ol' Jules' daughters war gittin' o' marriageable aige an' all war durned pretty an' built, from ranch life, tuh wear. An' any fella what married up with one of 'em would shore be right nice fixed fer life an', when ol' Jules got daid in th' end, them husbands would have a fair-tuh-fine outfit all his own an' his wife's.

This yere Hank Martin war a top-hand from high heels tuh Stetson, any way yuh takes 'im. He'd saved four hunderd real dollars, had it up

(Continued on page 136)



WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

YOU'RE like a million other men—you're facing a *big* question. The depression turned business topsy-turvy and now the rebuilding period stares you in the face.

Are the things that are happening today going to help or hinder you—what will they mean in your pay check? Where will they put you five, ten, twenty years from now? How can you take full advantage of this period of opportunity?

We believe you will find the answer here—a suggestion the soundness of which can be proven to you as it has been to thousands of other men.

The whole trend today—legislation, spirit, action—is to put men back to work, raise earning and spending power, *give every man a fair chance to work out his own salvation.*

The road to success remains unchanged but, bear this in mind, *what it takes to win is radically different!*

No employer today would dare risk an important post in the hands of a man who had not learned the lesson of '29. Why should he, when right at this moment he can pick and choose and get almost any man he wants at his own price?

Business organizations are rebuilding—reorganizing for the new conditions. Before it is over every man and every method will be judged in the cold light of reason and experience—then dropped, remade or retained. This spells real opportunity for the man who can meet the test—but heaven help the man who still tries to meet today's problems from yesterday's standpoint! Out of the multitude still jobless there are sure to be many frantically eager to prove him wrong and take his place.

Some Men Have Found the Answer

Seeing these danger signs, many aggressive men and women are quietly training at home—are wisely building themselves for more efficient service to their employers.

You naturally ask, "Has your training helped men withstand conditions of the last few years?"

Our answer is to point to a file of letters from many of our students reporting *pay raises and promotions while business was at its lowest ebb*—together with a myriad of others telling of greater success during these recent months of recovery.

Amazing evidence is ready for your investigation. We have assembled much of it in a booklet that is yours for the asking, along with a new and vitally interesting pamphlet on your business field.

This is a serious study of the possibilities and opportunities in that field. It is certain to contain an answer to vital questions bothering you today about your own work and earning power.

Send for these booklets—coupon brings them free. Be sure to check the LaSalle training that interests you most. We will tell you also how you can meet and take fullest advantage of today's situation. No cost or obligation—so why not mail the coupon now?

LASALLE EXTENSION, Dept. 10329-R, Chicago

Please send me—without cost or obligation—full information about how I can, through your training, equip myself for the new problems and opportunities in the business field I have checked.

- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL.B.
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Stenotypy
- ☐ Modern Foremanship
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Office Management

Name .....

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LASALLE EXTENSION adult business training

Arrest Him, Officer!

I'LL HAVE COMPLETE FACTS ON THE OTHER FELLOW TONIGHT!

Follow This Man!

SECRET Service Operator No. 38 is on the job . . . *follow him* through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator works. Tell-tale finger prints in the murdered girl's room that help him solve the great mystery! BETTER than fiction because every word is TRUE. No obligation. Just mail me the coupon and get—

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1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7967, Chicago, Illinois

Institute of Applied Science
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Men paid to dance with me—

I laughed when the man I loved objected.

It all seemed so harmless—a way to make money, so that we could afford to marry. . . .

Had I only known!

Read how I was trapped into participation in one of the meanest rackets in the world

IN

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one of the many sensational true stories of life and love in October

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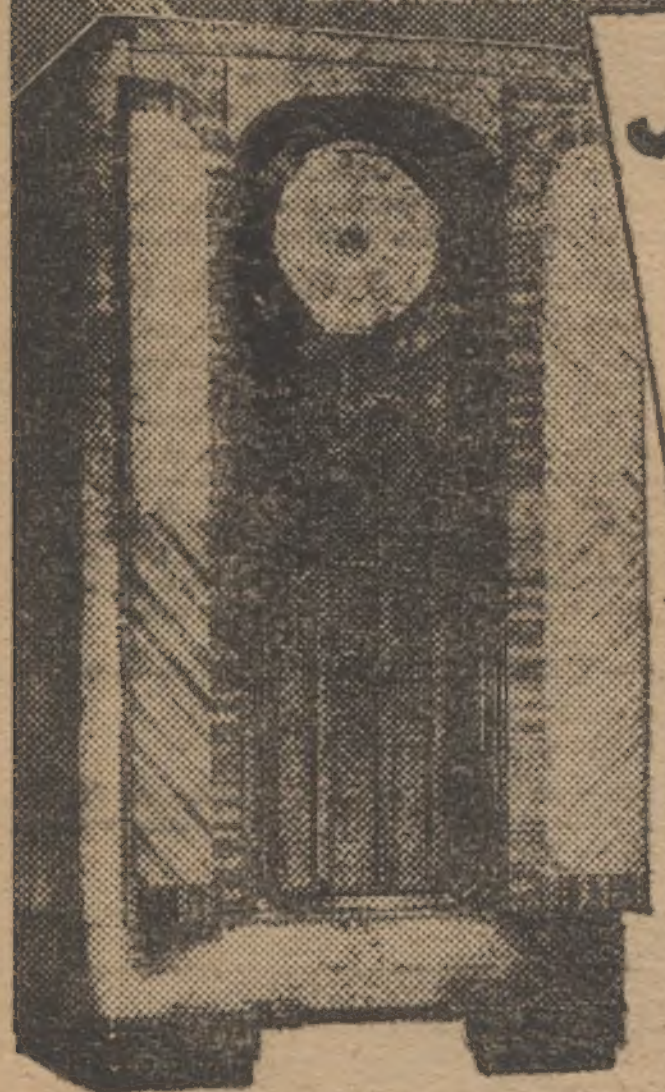
AUTOMATICALLY STOPS 'SMACK' ON THE STATION

MAGIC MOVIE SIX-CONTINENT DIAL

NO MORE DIAL TWIDDLING - ELECTRICALLY AUTOMATIC



JUST TOUCH BUTTON - LATEST 20-TUBE MIDWEST TUNES ITSELF BY ELECTRIC MOTOR!

ONLY MIDWEST'S DIRECT-FROM-FACTORY POLICY MAKES THIS AND OTHER SENSATIONAL FEATURES POSSIBLE AT AMAZINGLY LOW PRICES!

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Only $49.95

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You have a whole year to pay for your Midwest on the easiest and most convenient credit terms. Never before have you been offered so much radio for so little money—and on such easy terms!

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The "Magic Mystic Brain" is just one of 101 advanced features, many of them exclusive! It interprets your touch button signals and controls the electric motor. Nine contact fingers can be easily set to any stations you desire. Even a child can do it!

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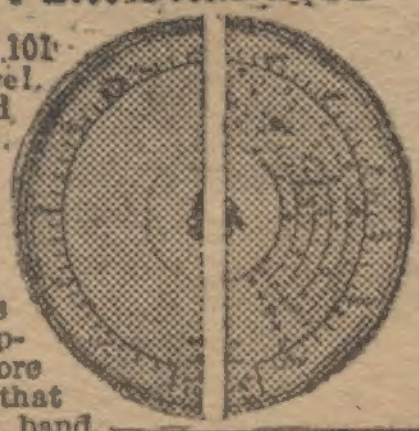
Now, you can delight in the world's finest six-continent overseas reception with a range of 12,000 and more miles (125 to 20,000 KC.) Note that chassis dial shows only broadcast band. Then flip 6-wave band switch, and, instantly, five additional bands are projected on the dial.



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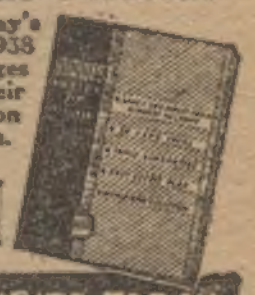

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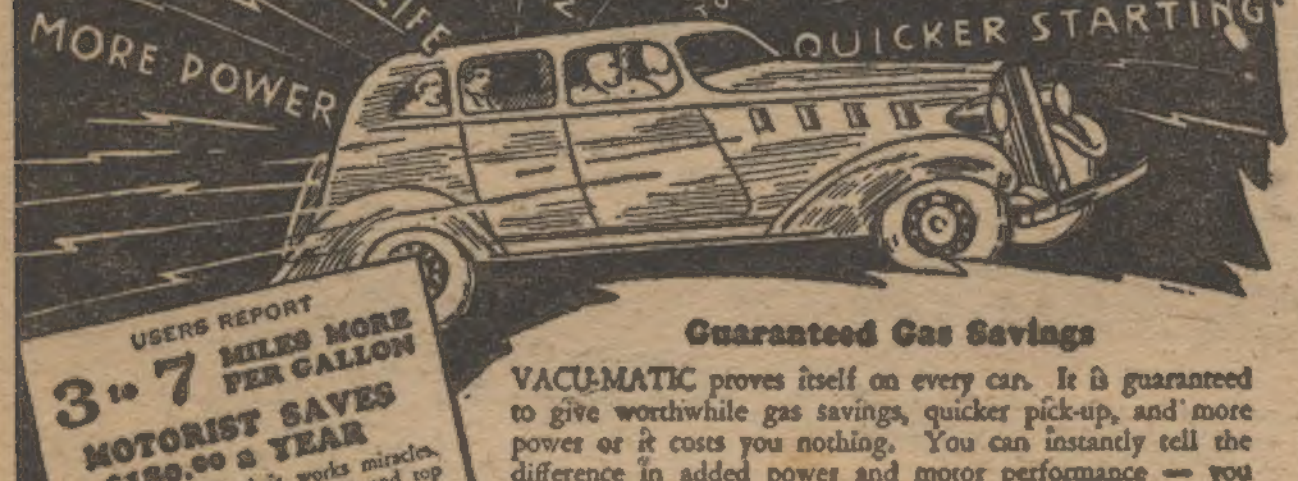
NEW MOTOR LIFE · MORE PEP · UP TO 30% GAS SAVINGS · QUICKER STARTING · MORE POWER



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3 to 7 MILES MORE PER GALLON
MOTORIST SAVES $180.00 a YEAR

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"Very glad to say, the Buick showed an increase of 5 miles more per gallon."—*A. V. Grove, Washington.*

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"It saves me one gallon a day. I had to buy 5 gallons each day—now only 4 gallons."—*L. V. Sweet, Pa.*

"I have twelve VACUMATICS on cars now, and they all show an increase in mileage. The car owners are very well pleased."—*Fred Taylor, Okla.*

"I have been placing VACU-MATICS on expert mechanics' cars. All are well pleased."—*J. W. Donahue, W. Va.*

AGENTS & SALESMEN
VACU-MATIC offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Valuable territories now being assigned. Check and mail coupon.

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VACU-MATIC proves itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up, and more power or it costs you nothing. You can instantly tell the difference in added power and motor performance — you quickly notice the cash savings on gasoline.

Fits All Cars

VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fused into one unit, correctly adjusted and *sealed at the factory*. Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can attach VACU-MATIC in ten minutes. Once in, its only reminder is the surge of instant power and speed it gives to the motor and the savings it affords your pocketbook.

Free Details

You owe it to yourself to know all about this remarkable discovery. Mail the coupon below. Start saving gas with VACU-MATIC and enjoy a new driving thrill! There's no obligation—so get the facts now! Write today!

The VACU-MATIC Co. Wauwatosa, Wis.

AT LAST! Automotive engineers have smashed down the barriers to perfected combustion! The new VACU-MATIC solves the secret of greater power! With almost magical action, this amazing invention instantly puts new life and pep in any motor. It adds mileage to every gallon of gasoline . . . produces split-second pick-up, sensitive accelerator response, quicker starting, greater speed and smoother running.

***Automatics* — Nothing Like It!**

The self-starter — four wheel brakes — knee action — streamlining — and now VACU-MATIC! The sensational money-saving invention! With it, engineers have achieved a practical means of balancing air and gasoline automatically for all speeds.

VACU-MATIC is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. It is so simple it will amaze you—so practical it will save you many dollars on gas costs.

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Gentlemen: Please send me full particulars concerning the VACU-MATIC and details of your Free Offer. This of course does not obligate me in any way.

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FUN · 15c Everywhere · FICTION

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!

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I am delighted with the U. S. School of Music course of instruction for the piano. It is clear and thorough. I have made wonderful progress.

*L. M. C., N. Y. C.

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I have completed your wonderful method for Guitar. For the past year I have been teaching and I have earned $200, thanks to the U. S. School of Music.

*C. C., New Jersey.

Wouldn't Take $1,000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Surprised Friends

I want to say that my friends are greatly surprised at the different pieces I can already play. I am very happy to have chosen your method of learning.

*B. F., Bronx, N, Y.

Best Method by Far

Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.

*A. O., Minn.

***Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.**

You, too, can play any instrument By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they longed to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study and practice to learn.

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! To cap the climax a free Demonstration lesson actually showed them how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 700,000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good times, popularity and profit.

And that's what you can do, right now. Simply mail the coupon below. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument — quickly, easily, in spare time at home. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge, training or talent. Just read the fascinating illustrated booklet that answers all your questions—examine the demonstration lesson. Both will be mailed to you without the slightest cost or obligation. Tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.) U. S. School of Music, 29410 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

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Name..... Have you This Instru.?.....

Address .....

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When Jake Kane Sashays Into the Loop

A Complete Novel

She was riding to warn him

Maid of

CHAPTER I

Night Rider

TEN years in Chipinka Prison had hardened Jake Kane's heart. But it had softened his saddle muscles. He was stiff-legged and weary the night he alighted in front of the Bank of Mustang.

Marfa Lamar Sides an Outlaw Maverick

M Ranch, He Brings Quick Gun Justice!

By

SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Gal Deputy," "Blood and Grass," etc.

when Sellers opened fire

Mustang Mesa

His roan horse was jaded, too, from long travel, tufted from shoulder to flank with dried sweat. Jake knotted a rein to the hitch-rail and crossed the sidewalk to the bank doorway.

He peered for a moment through the gold-lettered plate glass. Then, though it was long past closing time, he rattled the doorknob vigorously.

He paused, then rattled it again, harder. He was rewarded this time by a movement inside. A man's shadow was upflung to the ceiling by bleary lamplight in back of a metal-grilled partition.

The shadowy bulk emerged from behind the partition and came to the door. Jake Kane tensed with savage anticipation as he recognized "Horse-

and Works a Miracle with Faith and Trust!

shoe" Hibbs. And saw the banker pale in sudden recognition of him.

The door opened a crack. Kane pushed it wide and thrust himself inside.

For a wordless interval they eyed each other. The banker's hand rested on the door latch, as though to steady it. At length his shoulders rose and fell with something like a sigh. Then he closed the door carefully and motioned his visitor, without any pretense at cordiality, to follow him.

IN the rear of the bank, across Horseshoe Hibbs' desk, they faced each other again. The banker's pale eyes explored the other's face with the same cold scrutiny that he would give a doubtful check.

"Well, Jake," he finally croaked, "yuh ain't changed a whole lot. Except that the grey shows more at yore temples. With that jailbird haircut."

Jake Kane's lips twisted and he spoke from the side of his mouth.

"They clipped my hair. But they didn't clip my tongue, Hibbs."

Horseshoe Hibbs lowered himself into a chair.

"Bob Freeland, he's sheriff now," he breathed. "Young Bob, he's got a purty strong notion that you killed his old man." He fingered for makings as he spoke, and started a cigarette.

"S'pose I tell young Bob who *did!*" Kane snapped.

Horseshoe Hibbs gave a start and the paper tore in his fingers. He kept his face lowered as he brushed the tobacco crumbs from his knees. His voice became a husky whisper.

"Let's have it, Jake! How much d'yuh want?"

With a triumphant leer, the other flung a leg across a corner of the flat-topped desk.

"There was close onto twenty thousand in that Storm Mountain stage. You got it, Hibbs. I got ten years. You got Sheriff Freeland, too. You—"

Horseshoe Hibbs made an appealing gesture.

"Don't!" he pleaded, husky with fright. He seemed literally scared out of his wits.

Jake Kane grinned. There was a lamp on the desk between them. He cupped his hands over it, warming them. He rubbed them together, then jerked a thumb towards the heavy wall safe.

"Open 'er up, Hibbs!" he ordered. "I'm takin' my cut now. With int'rest, too, yuh damn skinflint! Yuh dirty, doublecrossin' coyote, I ought to peel off yore mangy hide in the bargain!"

The lamplight was in Jake Kane's eyes. Barely in time he saw the banker's hand dart desperately for a desk drawer.

He flung himself across the desk, grabbing for the six-shooter. His fingers clamped numbingly on Horseshoe Hibbs' wrist. The chair toppled. The two of them crashed to the floor.

Ten years of easeful living had made Hibbs' muscles softer than those of his one-time outlaw pardner. He struggled with ratlike ferocity. But Jake Kane bent his arm back to the snapping point. With a muffled cry, Hibbs' hold on the gun relaxed.

Out of a pocket Jake Kane whipped a coil of rawhide thong. He flopped Hibbs on his face and knotted his hands at his back, as he would have trussed a stolen calf for branding.

Hibbs' pale forehead trickled like eaves in a thaw by the time he was propped in his chair again, facing the desk and the lamp. Jake Kane, breathing hard, pressed the gun muzzle against the jumpy pulse in Hibbs' throat.

"The safe combination, start tellin'

it! Before I blow a collar button through yore dirty craw!"

Hibbs squirmed to the cut of the rawhide at his wrist and ankles. And around his bulgy middle, where he was bound to the chair.

His scheming nature—the fox cunning that had turned him from the owl-hoot trail into the maze of cow-country finance—asserted itself now. He attempted a reasoning tone.

"Look here now, Jake. They'll hear the shot up the street. Yuh can't git away with things like this no more, not in this country." Hibbs paused, wetting his lips, narrowly watching Kane's face for the effects his plea might have. Then he added: "Besides which, young Bob Freeland, he shoots faster'n his old man did. Faster'n straighter, Jake."

The other glowered uncertainly. He flung a longing look at the safe, then at the lamp. As he did so, a new fear laid hold of Horseshoe Hibbs. He knew the murder light when it leaped into Jake Kane's eyes.

Deliberately, the ex-convict slid the lamp along the desk until the bound man faced it. Carefully, then, he laid the six-shooter over the top of the chimney, balancing it there, so that the muzzle was aimed at the banker's heart.

He turned the wick up until the flame licked at the loaded cylinder. Then he straightened and without further threat strolled towards the doorway and the sidewalk. He called back over his shoulder:

"When it goes off, I'll be over at the saloon. I reckon that'll fix me up with a alibi. *Adios*, Hibbs."

For a horrified instant, Horseshoe Hibbs stared at the lamp, at the fast-heating gun. Once the cartridge primers, any one of them, heated to the exploding point—

He heard the door latch click under the departing Kane's thumb. He strained at the rawhide until the thongs bit deep into his flesh. And he screeched:

"Wait, Jake! For the love o' Gawd, man, come back!"

Jake Kane was chuckling when he stood over his one-time pardner again.

"I figgered that'd bring yuh around," he said.

"The gun! Grab it! Quick, Jake!" yammered the fear-crazed man.

WITH a taunting, leisurely reach, Kane lifted the six-gun off the lamp chimney. He went to the safe and fingered the combination knob.

"Awright, Hibbs," he growled. "Let's have it."

The other's wailed answer stunned him.

"It's empty, Jake! I swear it, on a stack o' Bibles! There ain't enough in there to—to—"

Jake Kane whirled in sudden fury.

"Yuh lie, yuh weasel!" he shouted.

"No, no! It's the Gawd's truth! Listen, Jake, I'm in deep water! I'm smack in the middle of a big gamble. If I win, I'll run this here country. Jake, let's talk this thing over. We got off to a left-legged start, that's what we did. Throw in with me, Jake. Once I git hold o' the Loop M, I'll be the richest man in this end o' the state."

Jake Kane's fury ebbed a little.

"Yuh mean," he grunted dubiously, "that yuh kin cut me in on something big? Something bigger'n my share in that Storm Mountain *dinero?*"

The danger moment had passed. The tension went from Hibbs' nerves. Again he was the schemer, and he exerted all the persuasion at his command. He wiggled to a more comfortable attitude and began to speak.

"It's thisaway, Jake. I started this bank on that—that Storm Mountain money."

"Ten fat years of it! While I

sweated blood! And now yuh claim the safe's empty!"

"Hold on, Jake, listen! That don't mean I'm busted, not by a long ways. I jest overstretched my resources, that's all. To loan fifty thousand to old man Lamar."

A sinister change came over Jake Kane. Murder light danced in his eyes again. He brought the six-shooter up with a balancing motion.

"I reckon yuh intend askin' me to wait around till Tom Lamar pays up, is that it? Damn yore measly hide, I happen to know Tom Lamar died last February!"

"That's jest it, Jake!" babbled Hibbs with a great show of enthusiasm. "That loan won't be paid. Leastwise, I don't want it paid. When it falls due next month."

Jake Kane blinked bewilderedly.

"Then what in all git-out *do* yuh want?" he blurted.

"I want the Loop M! Two hundred thousand acres o' the finest grass ever grazed on! The richest cattle spread between Texas an' hell!"

Jake reflected for a long moment, then nodded numbly.

"Reckon I savvy, now. Yuh want me to make shore that the Loop M won't be *able* to pay off that mortgage."

Horseshoe Hibbs heaved a vast sigh and relaxed.

"That's the idea, exackly," he stated. "It's a dead-shore cinch, Jake. The Loop M, it's a petticoat outfit now. Tom Lamar's gal, jest turned seventeen, is tryin' to run things. She's startin' fall roundup Monday on Mustang Mesa." He lowered one eyelid and leaned forward.

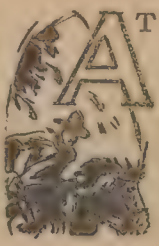
"S'pose," he said in a cautiously lowered voice, "that the Loop M roundup herd should stampede? S'pose they don't ever reach the loadin' pens in time? S'pose—"

He paused to squirm at the cut of the rawhide.

"Listen, Jake. Cut these dang things off. Let's me and you talk this deal over."

CHAPTER II

Petticoat Range



AT THE AGE when most girls dream of ruffles and romance, Marfa Lamar was interested in wild horses and bears. She rode with a tied lariat and there wasn't an empty tin can within miles of the Loop M home spread that she hadn't punctured with her father's old .45.

Motherless since babyhood, she had been reared like a boy. Old Tom Lamar had taken great pride in that.

"She kin do anything a man does except chaw tobaccer," he was fond of boasting.

But rough upbringing had not deprived Marfa of feminine loveliness. Riding, roping and the other rugged activities of ranch life had given her a fine-boned grace. Her maturing curves hid sinews like whipcord. She was not tall, but she had a deep-lunged erectness and flashing dark eyes that made her seem more than five feet five.

Her hair, tawny and thick, framed a delicate but determined oval of face with just a suggestion of freckles on wind-tanned cheeks. Her generous lips laughed easily. But under the firm, straight line of her brows anger came suddenly, too, at times.

Sometimes her long lashes veiled sadness.

Sad she had been since the sudden death of her father. And after seventeen carefree years, the responsibilities of the Loop M lay heavy on her young shoulders and the gravest of these was the debt to Horseshoe Hibbs.

Since she was a minor, the law had appointed an administrator—

"Pop" Pettis, a saddlemaker in Mustang. Her father's oldest friend.

But Pop Pettis was a feeble reed to lean upon. A kindly, bent old-timer who blinked behind thick-lensed glasses, he could handle figures but he couldn't handle men. That part of running the Loop M

became the task of seventeen-year-old Marfa Lamar. The job of hiring and firing.

The morning after Horseshoe Hibbs' unpleasant experience at the bank in Mustang, a strange rider appeared at the Loop M. He rode a sweat-caked roan. He was a grim-faced man, with crisp, stubbly hair silver-dusted at the temples. Eyes in which changing lights played, like breeze-fanned embers.

HE had appeared unarmed in Mustang. But he wore a six-shooter now. Its cylinder was still soot-streaked from precarious moments on a turned-up lamp.

It was Sunday, a day in which punchers usually loafed around the bunkhouse.

But Jake Kane found the bunkhouse empty. A chuckwagon was hauled up in front of the cook shack. A doleful-looking cook, bald-headed and with draggly, cowtail mustache, was loading the chuckwagon with supplies. Jake Kane reined up and lopped a leg over his bronc fork.

"Hi, grub-spoiler!" he greeted gruffly. "They tell me the Loop M's a-hirin'."

"Shaky" Simpson heaved a sack of flour over the tail-gate and dusted off his hands as he squinted critically at the visitor.

"I wouldn't say yes, and I wouldn't say no," he stated cautiously. "Some jiggers don't stay on long here."

"On account o' the gruesome grub?"

"On account o' woman bossin'. She's over at the cavvy corral, Miss Marfa is. If yuh're cravin' a job. I'll say this much, stranger. The Loop M, she's short-handed."

Jake Kane rode over to the high-fenced pole corral. He halted at the gate. The top bar was down. Inside he glimpsed a slight-built person drawing tight a saddle cinch on a black-tailed buckskin. Not until the smallish person jerked the macarty rope from a snubbing post and sprang for leather did he recognize the rider as a girl.

The instant that her spurred boot weighted the stirrup, the buckskin came to life.

It squealed and whirled, mane and tail flying as it arched into stiff-legged bucking.

Marfa Lamar hadn't time to settle herself in saddle. Riding loose, spurs digging for a cinch hold, her hat was flung high with one spine-jolting leap. Head down, heels up, the buckskin came towards the gate.

The girl was too busy fighting it to see the rider there. The buckskin cleared the gate bars. Daylight showed between Marfa and the saddle. She was game but weakening. The buckskin had the bit and her hair tossed as its mane did.

Jake Kane's knee telegraphed trouble to the roan. With nimble speed he worked in beside the maddened mustang. Dodging hoofs and a flopping stirrup that the girl had lost, he hooked an arm around her slim middle.

The roan came away from the riderless buckskin and Jake Kane eased the girl to the ground. His knees clamped again and he spurted after the runaway bucker.

His lariat slithered out from practised fingers as he went. Here was an art that ten years at Chipinka had not taken from the man. His loop dusted up, whirled, widened. He threw. Forty feet of hard manila slithered out, descended on the black, flying mane. Jake Kane hooked a knee over saddle-horn and threw his full weight against the rope as it snapped tight.

The buckskin flashed its underside, like a snagged fish. Dust billowed as it thudded on its back.

Stunned by the upset, it lay for an instant, flaring nostrils making little dust jets. In that instant, Jake Kane was out of saddle and to it.

When the buckskin struggled up, he had a firm grip on the reins. He ran a hand along its hot, quivering neck. The contact did some mysterious thing. The horse sighed and its flattened ears worked forward. It allowed the man to work the loop from its neck and over its head.

THEN Jake Kane saw a shadow on the ground beside him. He turned and Marfa Lamar, her brows a straight, angry slash above flashing eyes, confronted him.

"Horseshoe" Hibbs

"I could have handled him!" she crackled.

Jake Kane had a certain rough chivalry.

"You shore could of, Miss," he lied agreeably. "If yuh don't mind me suggestin' it, though, I'd say it takes two pairs o' hands to work the kinks out o' bad ones like this. Mustangs need anchorin' till yuh git set."

She regarded him, brows relaxing a little.

"You talk like you knew horses."

"Me, I've wrangled a few. This one ever been under saddle before?"

The girl's expression changed. "Dad rode him," she said.

Jake Kane nodded. "Tom Lamar, he could top fused dynamite and not lose a cigareet ash when it went off," he declared.

He knew, right then, that he had a job on the Loop M. An hour later, Jake Kane's soogans were in Shaky

Jake Kane

Simpson's chuckwagon and he was fitting new brake-shoes of harness leather on the wagon when Bob Freeland rode into the ranchyard.

The young sheriff of Mustang nodded a curt "howdy" as he passed the new hand and dismounted at the ranchhouse porch. Marfa met him at the door and swung the screen open welcomingly.

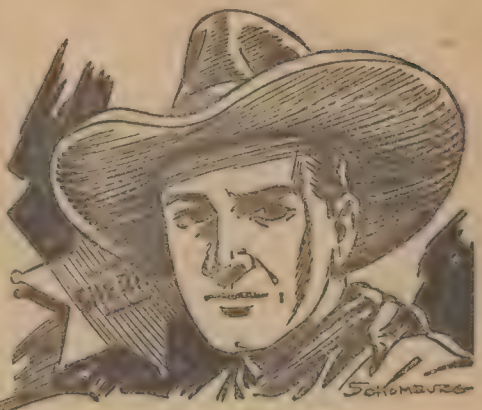
"We start for the mesa at daylight, tomorrow," she said.

Bob Freeland's white, even teeth showed in a hopeful grin.

"Jest what I come to talk about, little gal," he said. "I been sort o' thinkin'. Yuh know, a roundup'd make a mighty fine honeymoon. For the fortieth time I'm askin'—"

Marfa made a despairing gesture.

"And for the fortieth time I'm saying no," she interrupted. "If you only tended to ranching and gave up this sheriff job— Oh, Bob, don't



Bob Freeland

Marfa Lamar

let's start the argument all over again!"

He sobered.

"You know why I'm wearin' this star, honey," he said. "Some day I'll find the man I'm after. The man who killed Dad."

His voice trailed off as they went inside. Jake Kane jerked erect from his job of brake fixing. He cocked an alert ear to the murmur of young voices inside. He cat-footed to the shadowy edge of the porch. A few feet from him was an open window. He heard Bob Freeland's pleasant drawl.

"New help since I was here last. The new one, who is he?"

"He signed it Kane," came Marfa's reply. "I think I'm going to like him."

There was a momentary hush. Bob Freeland's drawl had become curt and harsh when he spoke again.

"Kane! From where?"

"He didn't say. Not much on the talk. Why, Bob?"

Jake Kane strained to hear the young sheriff's answer.

"There's a certain name been wrote down for a long time on a record in the jail office. The name Kane—"

"Stop right there!" the girl flashed. "That, Bob, is exactly why I'm dead-set against this fool sheriff job of yours! It's changed you and you'll keep on changing! Suspicious of everybody, everything! Like an old range cow with twin calves around bear scent. Besides which, you're letting the Freeland outfit go to pieces."

"But hold on, honey! When we're married—"

"I don't ever intend to marry up a new flock of trouble, Bob. Sitting up of nights, wondering, worrying—Just like your poor mother did that night your dad didn't come back from Storm Mountain. I was only a pig-tailed kid, then. But I'll never forget!"

BOB FREELAND'S voice was low and slightly husky as he said:

"Me, I'll never forget, either, Marfa. I swore then to git the dirty, skulkin' brush-dodger that murdered my Dad. And so help me, I'm wearin' his star till I do. That's plumb final, honey."

CHAPTER III

Out of the Past

JAKE KANE was at the wheel of the chuckwagon when Bob Freeland emerged from the ranchhouse. But he was busier with his own thoughts than with the brake-shoe.

The young sheriff's eyes were like hot rivets as he reined up sharply beside the wagon. Anger-widened, no longer humor crinkled at the corners.

"Kane," he began abruptly, "I crave to know yore back-trail!"

Kane was thankful for the interval that had allowed him to figure out his answers. Of the two, he was the calmer. He looked up, hard-faced and unalarmed.

"When I rode this country years ago," he parried, "a man wasn't asked where he come from."

Bob Freeland leaned from saddle; suddenly eager.

"Years ago? How many?"

"Ten. Seems like a hundred, though. Time, it drags some up at Chipinka."

The answer jolted the younger man. The truth was out—the truth that he had expected to wring as a reluctant admission. This man admitted he was Jake Kane. The law's Colt suddenly swung into view, in the saddle in front of him, his hand touching the butt.

"Yuh're comin' with me, Kane!" he gritted.

"For why?"

"To make talk!"

"I'm talkin' here, youngster. More talk, mebbe, than yuh'll care for."

Bob Freeland flicked a glance towards the house. He tried to keep his voice low as he said:

"The main thing is, right now, yuh're not lettin' the sun set on yuh, here on the Loop M. If Marfa was to know she hired a jailbird, yuh'd git scarce, sudden!"

"And if she knowed who shot yore old man, Freeland, mebbe you'd vamoose!" Jake Kane said it slowly, letting the words sink in like biting acid.

Somehow, the younger man steadied to that. For ten years he had waited for talk like this. His lips framed the word:

"Who?"

Jake Kane seated himself on the tail-gate of the chuckwagon. He deliberately rolled and lighted a smoke. He settled back against the bed rolls, arms in back of his head, cold, narrowed eyes fixed on the impatient young sheriff.

"Let's start at the beginnin'," he finally said. "Let's dig up a little ancient hist'ry, huh?"

"With the Storm Mountain holdup."

"Shore, with the stage affair. Well, I wasn't alone in that. Jest like the driver said, there was two of us. But the posse got me that night."

"The night my—my Dad was murdered! Bushwhacked!"

"Lucky thing I was caught, I reckon," mused Jake Kane. "Leastwise, I had me a alibi. Bein' a prisoner, I couldn't of plugged yore old man. Like the jury decided, later on."

"But yuh know who *did* kill him!"

Jake Kane gave a one-sided smile. A taunting, twisted grimace. He held the high cards and he enjoyed playing them.

"Yore old man and Tom Lamar, they'd got separated from the posse."

"I remember that. They always herded together."

"But they wasn't together next mornin' when Tom Lamar showed up in Mustang. He was alone. One shot gone from his gun."

"He'd got a shot at the fugitive at long range about dark."

The buckskin squealed and whirled

"Yeah, that's what he said. But later on they found yore old man. Shot through the back as he squatted at a spring." Jake paused, letting the sinister insinuation sink in.

The fight had gone out of Bob Freeland. He gulped hard, then blurted hoarsely:

"Good God, it couldn't o' been! They were friends, old friends! Tom Lamar was—"

"My pardner," Jake Kane continued, "he was never caught. They never got it out o' me who he was. And I was the only man who knowed. The only *livin'* man."

Bob Freeland's face was tragic. Jake Kane's word was thin proof. But this he knew—many a man in the Mustang country had made his start in ways that were never told. Some at a tricky card deal, others

with a careless branding iron. Others, in all likelihood, at a gunpoint.

He grew suddenly fierce again.

"If you aim to go tellin' that around—" he started to say.

Jake Kane dragged in smoke. The flare of the cigarette seemed to reflect in his strangely lighted eyes.

"I don't aim to tell, youngster. That is, not unless yuh crowd me. But if yuh tell that gal I wore stripes, then I'll tell her what I jest now said to you. We'll find out, then, who's most welcome around here."

Bob Freeland was overwhelmed with a longing to be alone, to think. He reined blindly away from the chuckwagon. His horse, unreined, hit the trail for town. Like a man in a daze the young sheriff rode.

It seemed too monstrous for him to realize. That Marfa's father had been his dad's murderer. He wove together theories of the killing until his brain ached.

Not until he was on the main street of Mustang did he reach any decision. That was, that the twenty thousand loot of that old-time robbery was hidden somewhere on the Loop M. That Jake Kane had come back to find it.

He resolved, therefore, to keep as close an eye as possible on Jake Kane.

Bob Freeland's departure from the ranchyard was the signal for Marfa to emerge from the house. She came straight to her new rider who was lowering himself from the tail-gate of the chuckwagon heeling his cigarette butt into the dust.

She confronted the man with a troubled face.

"I—I saw him talking to you," she began bruskly. "He'd let on that—that the law kept tally on you."

Until now, Jake Kane had glowed with the dodge he had pulled. Libeling a dead man's name didn't trouble a conscience as toughened as his.

But facing that man's daughter brought a new and uncomfortable sensation within him. He kept his face averted. He leaned over the repaired brake.

"Once I seen a chuckwagon cut loose down a hill and bust up in a creek," he said, whimsically endeavoring to evade the subject. "And the outfit didn't eat for a spell. Me, I like to see good brakes under vittles I aim to eat."

"I told him," the girl pursued relentlessly, "that I didn't believe it."

He stole a side glance at her.

"Got a heap o' trust in human nature, ain't yuh?" he said mufflledly.

"Oh, not so much. But I've got plenty of confidence in horse sense. I told him how that yellow mustang made up to you. You're the only man who'd laid a taming hand on him since—since Dad died."

SHE was looking at him clear-eyed and steady. It had been a long time, Jake Kane happened to think just then, since anybody had looked at him that way. With that man-to-man expression. Ten years in stripes, under suspicious guards, treated like a sheep-killing dog.

He felt suddenly irritable.

"Outlaw hosses, they're unreliable as outlaw men," he stated gruffly. "Don't go bankin' on the way any mustang acts."

He picked up his tools and stalked back to the barn, his brief glow of triumph over young Bob Freeland gone cold within him.

Marfa watched his receding back. Then she went back into the house, smiling a little forlornly.

"One thing, at least," she told herself. "He's the only man on this spread who works without bossing. Who turns a hand to odd jobs on a Sunday. I've an idea I'm going to get along with that man Kane."

The Loop M outfit rolled early next morning. Ten punchers beside

himself, Shaky, the cook; and Marfa Lamar in chaps and fluttery green neckerchief. It went well with the coppery glow of the early sun in her hair.

The loosely knotted riders had gone only a few miles from the home ranch, heading up towards the distant blue rim of the mesa range, when the girl reined up beside Jake Kane.

"I hope you aren't superstitious," she said with a flicker of a smile at her mouth corners. "About numbers, anyhow."

KANE, startled out of a moody reverie, looked across at her, a little startled.

"How come?" he demanded, almost savagely. "What yuh drivin' at?" Numbers! For ten years at Chipinka he had been a number, not a man.

"You're the thirteenth to join us," she told him. "Shaky growled about it. He had a dozen of everything—plates and what-not. You know how cooks are. Get upset easy."

Jake smiled crookedly, relieved.

"Yuh reckon that thirteen is aimed at me?" he asked. "That I'm due to meet up with trouble before this drive is over?"

"I hope not."

He squinted at her quizzically. She had said it earnestly. It made him feel warm inside, a little embarrassed. He shifted the talk to cattle.

She surprised him with her knowledge of the range, of markets, of the beef business from A to Z. She had her eye on the six-shooter he wore. She said all at once:

"I've been wondering where I've seen a gun like that before."

The man was flustered again.

"Piles o' guns like this one. Everywhere."

"Not on a silvered frame. Mind letting me see it?"

She reached out a small, gauntleted hand.

Jake Kane's eyes darkened.

"Mighty sorry, Miss," he said curtly. "That's one thing I *am* superstitious about, *muy* plenty. I don't like nobody else to handle my hardware. Feel half-naked without it."

She drew back her hand injuredly.

"I suppose you're one who thinks a gun isn't safe in a girl's hands," she said stiffly.

"Nope, it isn't that! It's—"

She whirled and loped back to the chuckwagon which was trailing the riders out across the open slope. She returned presently with a heavy .45 strapped around her slim middle.

"Dad never felt like you do about gun-totin' gals," she flung at him. "Look!"

She made a practised draw, smooth and swift. The trigger finger was cut from the gauntlet. It came level with her eyes, jarred smoke and the horses leaped.

Fifty yards away sunlight shone through a hole drilled squarely through the topmost pad of a clump of leaf cactus.

She turned laughingly as she holstered the big six-gun.

"Let's see if you're as fancy as your gun," she challenged.

Jake Kane whipped out the six-shooter that Horseshoe Hibbs had kept in his desk drawer. The balance was unfamiliar. He had never tried the action. He wasn't onto the sights quite as quickly as Marfa had been. When dust leaped twenty yards beyond the cactus clump he wished that he had taken longer.

She was looking at him shrewdly as he poked the silver-framed weapon back into holster with unnecessary force.

"I know one thing, Mister Man," she declared. "And that is, you haven't packed that thing a whole lot. Not so very long."

She left his side, then, joining the foreman. A young man with a red, pinched face and straw-colored hair, who was herding the loose cavvy of twenty head that showed signs of bolting at the noise of the shooting.

CHAPTER IV

Blood and Tears

THE Loop M roundup soon lost its holiday aspect. Two days out from the home ranch, real work began. Work of combing brushy draws, of bringing wild range cattle in bunches to the cut-out pens. Of selecting shipping stock that grew in numbers till a good-sized herd was bunched on a flats where a willow-rimmed creek straggled between thick-sodded banks.

Then night-herding to keep the growing tally from scattering. The Loop M riders turned gaunt and lean from short sleep. Nerve-trying days and nights when men's tempers shortened as their hours in saddle lengthened.

But Jake Kane experienced a physical regeneration. The open living, the crisp nights under glittering stars, the rough but wholesome chuck of the cow camp—these things combined repaired the bodily neglects of those dragging years behind grey stone walls.

He worked unstintingly. Though at times he found cynical amusement in the fact that the day was rapidly coming when he would assign himself to undoing the labors he helped to perform.

He kept to himself as much as possible. Nor did he have any impulse to mingle with the younger men of the outfit. Their talk tired him. His memories ranged back to the time when they were red-eared babies.

Out of that storehouse of experience he drew at times, recalling range lore that "Brush" Stacy, the young foreman, resented.

One night at the campfire, the foreman thrust his puckered, boiled-beet face into the rim of firelight and rasped:

"Come here, Kane. Me and you, we're makin' talk."

They went down by the creek willows, out of earshot of the others. Brush Stacy turned, feet wide, knuckles planted on his hips.

"Now lookit, Kane," he began, "if yuh're aimin' to pry my job out from under me, we might as well have it out here and now."

That took Kane by surprise.

"What's gnawin' on yuh, kid!" he exclaimed. "I already got me a job, ain't I?"

"But foreman's pay, it'd suit yuh better!" sneered Stacy. "I been seein' the signs. Playin' up to Marfa, like yuh done today! Cullin' out them ribby steers that I'd spent the morning hazin' out from the box canyon. On yore own say-so!"

Kane drew a deep, patient breath, spoke calmly.

"Listen, yearling," he said. "Them buyers that'll be down at the loadin' pens when we hit Mustang, they won't be on the lookout for shoe leather. If yuh'd looked twice, yuh wouldn't o' wasted yore time roundin' up mossy-horned mavericks. The shorest way to git measly prices from the buyers is with mixed stock. As I git it, the Loop M is in for a quick turn-over this fall. Easin' the low-grade feeders through in small, spring shipments."

"Come spring yuh'll be ridin' chuckline somewheres else!" Stacy threatened.

Jake Kane saw that a senseless mixup now would hinder his own plans. The plot that he and Hibbs had agreed upon. To scatter the Loop M roundup and prevent the

sale on which the mortgage settlement depended.

"Fergit it, kid!" he scoffed. "Yore job, it's plumb safe. I wouldn't straw-boss a petticoat outfit for any money!"

As he said it he jolted the resentful youth on the shoulder. He did it in rough good nature. But it was like a live spark in powder. Brush Stacy snarled an oath and swung.

Jake Kane took the blow glancingly on a jerked-up shoulder, the youngster's hard fist smacking him numbingly on the ear.

HIS own temper flared out of control then. He lashed out. He knew how to hit. His knuckles exploded in Stacy's raw-beef face and he cleared the ground. The foreman splashed into the icy-cold creek and sank.

As swiftly as he had struck, Jake Kane leaped in. He seized the limp burden by the shirt front. A precarious struggle with the fast, eager current and he hauled Stacy onto the bank.

There was a shout up by the fire. Then the shadows of men running. Kane gave Stacy a savage shake.

"Keep yore face buttoned, yuh half-made whelp!" he hissed. "Me, I'll do the talkin'!"

Marfa was one of the first to reach them.

"What on earth happened?" she cried.

Jake Kane gave a warning twist on Stacy's throat.

"Didn't happen on earth, exactly," he explained. "Hunk o' bank caved in. We got a bath, both of us."

Shaky galloped down to the spot with a lantern. Marfa Lamar stared at the blood that dribbled from her foreman's nose and lips.

"He must o' hit a rock," Kane explained lamely.

Sullenly silent, Stacy tugged loose and returned swayingly to the fire. Shaky trailed along after him, gabbling. Marfa laid a warm hand on Jake Kane's arm. She drew close.

"You," she said in a low voice, "are one awful liar. Stacy started it, didn't he?"

Kane's lips framed a denial. But a shudder gripped him. The night bit through his soaked clothing. The girl whipped off her jacket and flung it over his shoulders.

"Come," she said.

Back at the camp, she ordered him to strip while she heated a blanket by the fire. Jake Kane meekly obeyed, his teeth chattering. He sputtered protests when she came and handed the blanket inside to him, ordering him to swaddle himself to the chin. She brought his soogans to him, opened them herself and made Kane crawl into them and cover up tightly.

"Yuh'd think I was an invalid!" he complained peevishly.

"I don't want you to be," she said quietly.

She gathered up his wet clothes, oblivious to his violent protests, and took them to the fire. He pretended to be asleep, a long time later when she stole back with them and piled them in a neat bundle beside his bed.

Nor did he sleep for hours after, though he was dog-tired. Something had happened inside him. Some uncomfortable process of spiritual regeneration, as great as his physical change, was twisting painfully at his heart.

The next morning Brush Stacy quit and Jake Kane became foreman of the "petticoat outfit."

The men had confidence in him. Roundup proceeded at a briskened pace. Shaky, that night, celebrated the event with a "dough god" or camp cake, kettle-baked, larrup-layered and adorned with the Loop M brand in sugar pine icing.

Marfa was in the brightest mood

that the outfit had known since her father's death.

"I'm thinking," she announced, "that we'll be driving a herd into Mustang in another ten days. What do you think, Jake?"

Kane kept his eyes, troubled and clouded, on his plate as he speared a hunk of bacon.

"Where yuh reckon young Stacy took hisself?" he wanted to know.

"He's got a raft o' relations over Storm Mountain way," Marfa told him. "His uncle runs a few head here on the mesa. I wouldn't be surprised to see them before we get out of here."

"The uncle, who is he?" Jake asked.

"Seth Sellers. Lazy S."

"Sellers!" Kane barked the name as he suddenly straightened.

"One o' the few remainin' old-timers. Ever heard o' him?" inquired Shaky.

Kane bent over his plate again.

"Sort of," he admitted guardedly.

There was a flutter of alarm in his bosom. Only too well did he remember Seth Sellers. One of that posse that had closed in on him after the Storm Mountain robbery. He had hoped, after ten years, that none would be left to recognize him.

Kane's turn at night guard came, eight o'clock till midnight. As he started for the corral and his horse, he sauntered near Shaky.

"Sellers, he's apt to feel some grudge towards the Loop M, ain't he?"

"I wouldn't say yes, and I wouldn't say no," the cook replied carefully. "He's the kind, though, that plumb rejoices in trouble. Hair-triggery ol' cuss, Seth is. They hang together purty tight, that tribe."

Kane strode thoughtfully to the horse corral. Marfa followed him. She seemed to tag him like a puppy at every chance.

"Sellers and Dad, they never got along," she told him. "I'm glad you're here."

He fingered the cinch of his roan.

"Yuh seem mighty worried over some upset," he grunted.

"If you knew Horseshoe Hibbs, you'd know why. Even if things go smooth and the market stays up, I'll be borrowin' twenty thousand to keep the Loop M."

"Borrowin' where?"

"Pop Pettis says he can corral it. The main thing is, I want to get clear with Hibbs."

"How so?"

"I don't trust him."

"Huh! Yuh got a odd way o' trustin' some folks on mighty short acquaintance, and distrustin' others."

"Hibbs is a crook!"

KANE peered at her curiously in the starlight.

"That's a hard name to give a banker," he told her. "Unless yuh got proof tuh back it."

"And I'm none too sure of Pop Pettis," she added. "He's straight as a pipe stem. But he owes Hibbs' bank, same as most everybody in this country. Drank himself into a hole. I tell you, Jake," she hurried on with a burst of confidence, "I need a friend, somebody I can go to, depend on—"

"How about young Freeland?" she suggested.

"When Bob's your age, maybe he'll have some sense!"

"Sort o' fond o' him, ain't yuh?"

"More than he knows. But I love the Loop M, too. I was born here. It's mine. I promised Dad I'd hang on, keep it always. That was the last thing we ever talked about."

She stood close, so close that her weary, upturned face touched his shoulder for an instant. The contact seemed magnetic, bringing her closer. He saw the tears come. She buried her face against him to hide

them. He felt a stifled sob shake her.

Kane's arm encircled her protectively. He looked up at the clean, vast sweep of night sky, as though imploring some force mightier than his own. He lost a battle against an unaccustomed tenderness that overwhelmed him, warmed him like powerful drink.

And then unreasoning anger shook him. Why in all hell, he asked himself inwardly, did this motherless, unweaned she-calf have to sniffle all over him?

HE lifted her chin with a jerk, swabbed her cheeks clumsily with a corner of his neckerchief, then whacked her on the back and thrust her from him.

"Don't be a slobberin' brat!" he growled.

He grabbed stirrup, swung onto the roan, and it leaped in injured amazement at the hard jab of his spurs.

"She figgers she's got me hooked!" he thought as he rode for the bedding grounds. "Well, she's got another think comin'!"

Two circle riders met him at the edge of the herd. The cattle were quiet, the night serene.

"You boys head for camp and grab some sleep," he ordered.

"This is a mighty big bunch," one started to object. "If they'd start movin', if anything got 'em on their feet—"

"Git yore tails behind yuh and vamoose!" Kane rapped out.

They went. He watched them disappear into the night. His lips twisted into an effort at the old, sneering hardness.

His plan was shaping up quicker than he had hoped. Along towards midnight he would raise the nickeled six-shooter and cut loose at the moon. The herd would leap into stampede, with a few war whoops to hurry them, for the numberless draws and thickets on the wide mesa.

The short-handed Loop M outfit could never round them up again, in time to meet the Hibbs note. And the beauty of the whole timely affair was that he could shift the suspicion onto Seth Sellers.

The next time that he, Jake Kane, rode this range, he wouldn't be a straw-boss. He would be Hibbs' partner. He would be half owner of the Loop M.

He jogged around the flanks of the herd, mentally rehearsing every detail of his actions to come. He cast frequent glances toward camp, waiting for the fire glow to die, for the punchers to be wrapped in deep sleep.

He pictured their dull despair, after a startled awakening to the thunder of hoofs. Their frenzied efforts to stay the rush. The trampled bedding-grounds, when dawn came, without a single head left to represent the days and nights of gruelling roundup.

He rode restlessly, marking the passing hours with nervous smoking. When the stars said midnight and the distant campfire was a weak pinpoint of light, he drew the six-shooter.

He raised it over his head and his trigger finger slowly tightened. He felt the hammer creep at his steady pull.

And then a vagrant breeze caught a corner of his neckerchief and it fluttered against his cheek. He remembered swiftly how, when he had ridden from camp, it had been still damp. Tear-wet.

Marfa Lamar was thrust into his consciousness. His finger eased on the trigger. His upraised arm slowly lowered.

Aloud, with steady, furious oaths Jake Kane lashed himself to the deed that he could not do.

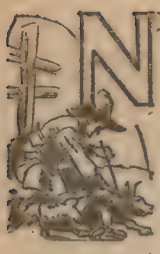
He felt suddenly weak, washed-out,

and his brow was beaded as though from a desperate physical struggle. He holstered the gun. He sleeved his sweat-shiny face.

Then he rode for camp and roused his relief.

CHAPTER V

Seared Flesh



NEARING noon next day two riders appeared over a far-off rise. They came towards the Loop M camp with the unswerving gait of men who hastened to an errand of hate.

Jake Kane recognized the lank figure of Brush Stacy.

The other rider sat his saddle like a feed sack. A thick, stodgy man with a carbine booted against his saddle skirt. That man, Kane knew, was Seth Sellers. Sellers rode a little in the lead and his hat was tugged down low in front, dipping towards his jutting, bristly chin.

Kane was at the cavvy corral when he saw them, swinging his saddle onto a fresh horse. He watched the nearing pair for an instant, face grim, eyes glinting like heat lightning.

It was a show-down now. He had to act quick, in whatever he did. Seth Sellers wasn't the sort to forget a face, even after ten years had changed it with deepening lines.

And recognition would be Jake Kane's finish.

The first thought that came to him was to plug that sacklike, advancing figure as soon as it came in range. He would have exulted in it. He hadn't forgotten, that time when the posse got him, that old Sellers had argued for a rope finish. A stout tree and a lynching loop.

Then Marfa Lamar appeared, riding hard from a slope that led down to the corral. Kane swore under his breath, hand falling away from the six-shooter at his hip.

The girl flung herself from saddle and rushed to Kane's side breathlessly. Her cheeks were bright spots of color, her eyes over-bright.

"He's got his neck bowed for trouble, old Sellers has!" she cried. "We've got to handle him, Jake! How?"

Despairingly Kane realized he could not crack down on his enemy now. And he could not afford to wait for the yelp of recognition and a forced draw.

He did some swift, desperate thinking. He managed to keep his voice level.

"I'll have the ol' walloper eatin' out o' my hand," he said. "It's close onto eatin' time, too."

He went with long strides towards the campfire, up from the corral.

The girl trotted after him. Shaky was squatted at the fire, poking in fresh fuel, hand upraised to shield his face from smoke.

That gave Jake Kane his idea.

In the hot ashes at the edge of the fire sat a big skillet of smoking-hot grease. On a rock, near at hand, was a heaped plate of fresh fry meat.

Kane knelt.

"We got company, Shaky—git things on the fire," he said quickly. "With some beef under his belt, that old thunder pumper'll feel more amiable."

He slid the pan of fresh, moist beef into the smoking skillet, bending purposely low as he did so. Shaky yawped a warning and grabbed at it, but too late.

The hot grease hissed and leaped. Kane's eyes were squinted tight shut, his jaws clamped like a vise in preparation for this self-inflicted ordeal. The searing grease struck him full in the face.

An agonized groan escaped his lips as his flesh cooked blisteringly.

Marfa uttered a stricken scream and flung herself beside him, arms about him. Shaky pounced on a can of flour and hurled it into the suffering Kane's face.

That was the best emergency treatment for a severe burn.

When Seth Sellers and young Stacy rode into camp, Kane was pillowed on Marfa's jacket. His features were unrecognizable under a thick coating of flour. And the girl was ripping bandage strips, tenderly binding the puffed, disfigured face, easing the pain.

Seth Sellers forked his saddle in glowering silence. At length he rumbled:

"Well, he might o' been hurt a sight wuss!"

KANE lifted his head and peered one-eyed through the bandages.

"What d'you two hyenas want?" he demanded.

Young Stacy flung a glance towards his uncle.

"Nuthin' that can't be put off," the old-timer finally said. "And added onto by waitin'."

"I'll look yuh up when the time comes," Kane promised.

Without further parley they turned and rode off. It seemed, then, that Jake Kane grinned briefly through his mask of pain. He had triumphed. Seth Sellers had not recognized him.

Too, the touch of Marfa's hands was pleasant and soothing, subduing some of the throbbing hurt. Shaky heaved a sigh like a foundered calf.

"Whooey!" he breathed relievedly. "I never figured that ol' sinner'd simmer down so easy!"

"Speakin' o' simmerin'," Kane spoke up, "git that chow to goin'. Then pack the chuckwagon and roll. Kin yuh git to Cold Creek by sundown?"

"I wouldn't say yes," replied Shaky, wiping his unsteady hands on his floursack apron, "and I wouldn't say—"

Marfa interrupted.

"What's your idea," she asked Kane, "in shifting camp?"

"We're headin' for Mustang. *Muy* pronto. Some busy cleanup riding on the way, and we'll have a thousand head tally by the time we hit the shippin' pens."

A new resolve had taken hold of him. He had abandoned the thought of stampeding the Loop M cattle.

Seth Sellers' visit had furnished him with a bigger and better idea. Whatever happened henceforth, suspicion would be thrown on the hostility of the Lazy S clan towards the Loop M.

Kane's blistered face didn't interfere with his lively management of the slow-moving herd. One day out of Mustang, he called in the outriders. He held the herd for the last night-camp on the lower reaches of Cold Creek, where the stream seeped into the sands of the lower range.

And there Bob Freeland appeared.

Marfa was quick to note the change that had come over Freeland. She missed his usual bantering greeting and the blithe proposal that had always accompanied it.

"Pop Pettis," he announced bluntly, "has been on a bender for a week."

"Any more cheerful news?" Marfa asked.

"He hasn't raised a dime o' that twenty thousand."

"I've got to raise that loan somewhere, somehow!" the girl cried desperately.

"I wouldn't bust no hame strap worryin' about it," young Freeland said. "Look!"

He fished from his pocket a slip of yellow paper, unfolded it and handed it to Marfa. The firelight was dim. She stared at what he had given her.

"What is it?" she asked uncom-

prehendingly. "A check? For—"

"For twenty thousand. I raised it myownself. Mortgaged my little ol' cow spread up to the hilt, Marfa. With Hibbs."

"No! I won't have it that way!" she cried.

"Why not?"

"If I can't pay—if you lose—"

"Yuh've always claimed I wasn't cut out for ranchin', nohow. What if I do lose? Besides which—" he flung a grim, significant glance towards Kane— "I got a notion I'll be layin' my hands on another twenty thousand one o' these days."

"How?"

The young sheriff didn't answer. He couldn't tell her his growing belief that the amount, the long-missing loot of the Storm Mountain stage robbery, was cached somewhere on the Loop M range. By her own father's hand. And that it was finder's money now, after all these years.

Once Jake Kane uncovered it, young Freeland determined to have a final reckoning with Jake Kane.

He got up and looked out over the dark, shadowy mass of the herd.

"Yuh've got a hand-picked bunch there, I've heard."

"I've got a hand-picked foreman on the job, now."

He nodded tensely.

"Yeah, I've heard that, too. Brush Stacy's in town. Some drunk, he is. And spreadin' the word that you and that—that hairpin have got purty thick."

The girl flushed and rose to her feet.

"Talk up, Bob. What have you got against Kane? What has he ever done?"

He shrugged. "Give a man enough rope—" he said cryptically.

"And he's apt to hang somebody else!" she flashed.

She was puzzled at the effect her random words had on him.

"Marfa, yuh're hittin' closer to the target than yuh think," he declared.

He turned from her and swung reins over his horse's head.

"Wait!" she called out, coming towards him, the check outthrust.

BOB FREELAND ignored the gesture. He mounted and started for town. The hurt was deep in her eyes as she watched him go. Neither by word nor tone had he shown any affection. Instead, he had handed money to her.

Jake strolled over.

"That young jigger, he acted sort o' high-snooted," he remarked in casual tones.

At sound of his voice, she turned. She laid hold of his arm, sat down and drew him beside her.

"Jake, I need advice—your advice."

"On business? Or love?"

She looked at him queerly.

"Who said anything about love?" she demanded.

"Yuh don't have to say some things. To make yoreself understood, plain as a pipe stem. My advice is this. Tie to Bob Freeland. He's a mule-headed, misguided young galoot. But he's one square hombre. They don't come no better. And here's somethin' else. There's a heap o' things in life worth more'n the best cow ranch in the world. Take it from me; I know. Happiness, it's a tenderer plant than range grass. Yuh can't trample it down, then figger on it sproutin' up again."

"Then you advise me to—"

"Whatever diff'rence has come between you and that stiff-necked young sheriff, forgit it. Don't let money come in between the two o' yuh. And if yuh're plumb fond o' him, and want him to stay healthy, keep him out o' Loop M affairs."

Marfa Lamar was silent for a long, thoughtful moment. Finally, with a tone of decision, she said:

"Thank you, Jake. That's all I wanted to know."

Next morning she rode into Mustang. She was waiting at the bank when Horseshoe Hibbs appeared.

He greeted her effusively. With an unconvincing show of cordiality. They went inside. He waved Marfa into a chair beside his desk.

"Now what kin I do for yuh, young lady?" he asked, rubbing his hands together, smiling with his mouth but with eyes cold and calculating.

"You've done plenty, Hibbs," she said. "I've come to give you—this."

She thrust the check that Bob Freeland had brought into his hands. Hibbs blinked at it. His pale brow creased slowly. He shot a look at the girl, his suavity gone.

"He told me, the two-tongued young rascal, that he needed it to restock his own spread!" he rasped. "I'm not acceptin' it on the Loop M mortgage, not by no means! I'm not payin'—"

"Keep your shirt on, Hibbs," Marfa interrupted. "I'm not taking the money. We're not cashing your check, either one of us. I'm handing it back to you. You'll get no hold on Bob Freeland, like you got on—on my Dad!"

Hibbs' mouth opened and closed like a trap.

"Understand, I ain't renewin' the Loop M mortgage on no unpaid balance!" he declared sharply.

"I'm not asking you to. I'll find some way out. Some other way."

The alarm went from his face. This was going to be easy, he thought. Nobody else in the Mustang country had twenty thousand to lend.

He opened the drawer of his desk and put the yellow check inside. Marfa had risen, was standing over him. She had visited the bank in times past. On various occasions she had seen Hibbs open that drawer. Each time she had glimpsed something inside that was not there now.

Remembrance swept over her. She knew, now, where she had seen that silver-framed six-shooter before. The gun that Jake Kane carried, and with which he was so obviously unfamiliar.

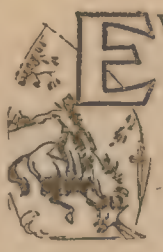
Her brows came down in a straight, unyielding line. It was only too evident that some secret understanding existed between the one man she had trusted, and Horseshoe Hibbs. Bob Freeland's guarded hints—

Whatever it was, she determined to find out. She left the bank and rode out of town. She struck out at a lope for the dust cloud that marked the nearing herd.

She was going to have a showdown with her foreman.

CHAPTER VI

Price of Freedom



EVEN though Jake Kane had mellowed, he had not reformed. The plan that had leaped into his mind when Seth Sellers and Brush Stacy came bristling into the Loop M camp that day was only an elaboration of the one that he and Horseshoe Hibbs had concocted.

When the Loop M herd neared Mustang, buyers would be there. With cash to clinch a big beef transaction. For a man of his talents, it would not be difficult to change that ready money from a buyer's pocket to his.

Thus he would be free of all involvement with the tricky Hibbs. He would have greenbacks instead of green grass to reimburse him for those ten long years in Chipinka.

And it would be sharply recalled that Seth Sellers, notorious gun-

toter and trouble-hand, packed a grudge against the Loop M. Suspicion would be directed towards the Lazy S clan. And, as a concluding advantage to this plan, Marfa Lamar would not be the loser.

But Kane's plan underwent another change when Bob Freeland paid his visit. He had overheard the talk between Marfa and the young sheriff.

"That sidewinder Hibbs, he told me his safe was empty as a run-down stove in summer!" he reflected. "Yet here he up and writes off a twenty thousand dollar check for young Freeland! It looks like me an' Hibbs is goin' to lock horns again, *muy* plenty!"

HE waited until the herd was moving next morning. When the drive was going smoothly, he left his position, at the point of the moving mass of backs and horns, and made a fast ride into Mustang.

His intention was to go straight to the bank. But he saw Marfa's horse standing at the hitch-rail in front. He did not want to encounter her there. What he had to say to Hibbs, he wanted to say alone.

He swung from saddle in front of the Mustang Saloon. He went inside. Brush Stacy was at the bar, the center of a group of relatives and sympathizers. Early though it was, he was drunk. At Kane's entrance he swayed around, gripping the bar for support.

The red of his puckery face had spread to his eyes, small and inflamed like a savage bull's.

"The ol' cut-out rider, hisself!" he leered unpleasantly. "Guttin' out Bob Freeland, that's what he's most successful at!"

The others snickered appreciatively.

The old hardness had come to Kane's burn-scarred countenance. Even then he would have turned and left, rather than risk a senseless encounter. But he wanted to keep out of Marfa's sight until he had settled things with Hibbs.

"Keep to yore affairs, kid, and I'll keep to mine," he retorted.

He went to the end of the bar, back swung towards the group. He nodded to the bartender for a drink. He would be needing it, maybe, before he finished with Hibbs.

He poured one two fingers high. He looked out, over the top of the saloon doors and saw Marfa emerge from the bank, mount and ride off.

Lurching feet sounded behind him. He turned as young Stacy swept a clumsy hand out and knocked his drink to the floor.

"Yuh — cradle - robber!" Stacy snarled. He was recklessly courageous, with friends at his back and whiskey under his belt.

Kane shoved, but didn't strike. Stacy toppled backwards, grabbed at the bar and missed. He fell sprawling at the feet of his companions. His holstered six-gun thudded on the floor. He went for it.

"Grab him!" Kane shouted.

Instead, the others scattered. Stacy's gun was drawn and a shot slammed out. A slug grooved the bar as Kane leaped back.

Stacy's gun was leveled again in a slower pull as Kane whipped out the silver-framed six-shooter. He knew the heft of it better than that time when Marfa Lamar beat him at cactus-drilling.

It jolted in unison with Stacy's gun. Lead grazed Kane's ribs, under the heart. Lead that would have pierced him had his lean body not twisted in the draw, gunman style.

Brush Stacy's warped, embittered face wore an amazed look. He stared for a second, then his face flopped down on the floor. In the fall his hat had been jolted from his head. High on his forehead, under the

mop of straw-colored hair, blood gushed and pooled on the floor.

Kane jerked out to the bartender: "He plumb insisted on it! You saw him!"

"It's a lie!" one of the scattered drinking companions of the dead Stacy bellowed. "He shot him when he was down! Knocked him down, then let 'im have it!"

The bartender leaned towards Kane.

"Hightail, Mister! Travel!"

One of Stacy's friends drew. Kane swung the six-shooter.

"Shed it!" he rasped.

The gun dropped. The six-shooter muzzle fanned all of them now, as Jake Kane backed towards the swinging doors.

He stepped outside. Someone was running. He craned around. Bob Freeland leaped for him.

Kane ducked, poked out a foot and swung for the young sheriff's ear. He sent him tumbling through the saloon doors.

Kane sprang for his roan. He hit saddle and spurted off to dust-spattering bullets from the law's gun.

There was no turning back now. He knew that Stacy's friends would perjure him into prison. It was true that Stacy had been down. But far from out. Perfect though it was as a case of sheer self-defense, it was improbable that even the bartender would speak up for him. For the influence of Stacy's clan was powerful in Mustang.

Pursuit poured down the street, Bob Freeland leading. Kane resolved not to shoot it out with him, at whatever cost.

He bolted for the dust cloud that streamed out from the herd. He lost himself in it. He doubled and made for the mesa. When he hove into view again, the sheriff and his volunteer posse were outdistanced.

But Bob Freeland was not giving up. One by one the others fell out of the race. On a large, powerful black, the young sheriff plunged doggedly on. It became a dodging game, back where gullies seamed the mesa's rim.

From days of combing the region for cattle, Kane knew the lay of the land. But always, as he emerged from a dip, his Nemesis was watching from open ground and spurred towards him.

THE chase carried them far back onto the Loop M range. In the vicinity of the roundup ground. At dark, haggard and exhausted, Kane hid himself in the willows. The jaded roan browsed from the frost-red twigs.

This was no new thing. The instincts of a hunted thing returned to Jake Kane. He burrowed into fallen leaves and seized such scant rest as was offered. He stayed the night out. But he was stiff with cold when dawn came.

He heard a small movement, out in the open, in the direction of the recent camp. He snaked through the willows until he could see a sweep of the slope, the empty cavvy corral, the cold heap of what a few days before had been a cheering campfire.

And as the light grew, he saw what had alarmed him. On a dim clutter of tin cans he saw two coyotes quarreling over refuse that Shaky, the Loop M cook, had flung away.

Jake Kane rose and stalked into the open. The coyotes scurried off. He strode to the spot where they had been foraging.

His breakfast was picked from such stale tidbits that they had not yet devoured. Law dodgers could not afford to be finicky.

He returned to the creek, flattened himself and washed down his unsavory repast. He led the roan out

into the open. The frost had settled heavy. Winter was in the air. This was a cruel country for a fugitive. Blue with cold, Kane mounted, thankful for the warmth from the horse.

To the north lofty, limestone pinnacles speared the bright, cold sky. They had been an outlawry haunt in the old days. The place for which he had been headed when the posse took him.

He started for them. They looked near, in the clear, high air, but were nearly a day's ride away. But the limestone was honeycombed with caves. There was game, water. And it was a tumbled maze where he could play hide and seek with pursuers until he held a pow-wow with himself and decided on his future efforts.

He was leaden-hearted. Nothing now to prevent Hibbs from closing down on the Loop M. And as he thought about it more, he realized that the gap that separated Marfa and Bob Freeland was of his own creating.

Would the young sheriff marry the girl whose father he believed had murdered his own?

That night, sheltered in a cavern like a predatory animal, Jake Kane fought an unsparing battle with himself.

"It looks like my sun has set," he finally decided. "The one decent thing that I kin do, with what days and hours I got left, is to see that them two youngsters git together. It shore ain't fair that the little gal'd lose the Loop M and her man, both."

He started a vigil next morning from a high point of rock. He scanned the country below, hoping to see the young sheriff's black. Kane was ready now to risk anything to make talk with Bob Freeland. To admit his lie that old Tom Lamar was not mixed up in the Storm Mountain robbery. That it was another man who had ambushed and killed young Freeland's father.

"If I was a squealer, I might even tell who. Hibbs, he shore deserves that, the measly, smirkin' hypocrite!" Kane told himself. "But if that young knothead, Freeland, knowed the truth, he wouldn't wait for no due process o' law. He'd crack down, *muy* pronto, on Hibbs. And without proof, they'd say he done it on account o' the gal. No, I reckon I can't tell. Not yet."

He shot a mountain sheep and hung the carcass in a cave. The roan picked at meager grass in hidden pockets in the rocks. Keeping a steady vigil through the daylight hours, Jake wondered how long it would be before snow flew.

THE game, then, would descend to the lower country. He would have to follow or slowly starve.

Beard grew over his scarred face and he turned primitive as the ancient cliff-dwellers in habits and appearance. He lived for one purpose—to right some old-time wrongs. Up there, so close to the stars and amid deathlike solitude, Jake Kane found his better self.

It was a far cry from a Chipinka cell. A spot where a man's soul could expand. Where the sun could shine into dark, hidden places. The process of regeneration that began with Marfa Lamar's trust in him seemed complete.

Then came a morning when, from a lofty crag, Jake Kane saw a line of horsemen advancing towards the pinnacles. Coming slowly, in a wide front, combing every canyon and draw.

The Mustang Mesa manhunt had begun. And in the center of that dragnet rode young Bob Freeland on his big black.

Lips compressed, Jake Kane eyed the posse, fought to keep calm.

CHAPTER VII

Dead or Alive

HORSESHOE HIBBS was in a state of uneasiness as the Loop M herd neared Mustang. What had happened to Jake Kane? What had blocked their agreed plan of a stampede?

He had learned, when Brush Stacy brought the news to town, that Kane had succeeded in getting on the Loop M payroll. Then, when Marfa paid her brief visit at the bank, he had longed to learn more. But to do so might have tipped his hand.

He refrained, therefore, from any questions that would have linked him and the one-time stage robber. Then came the Stacy shooting. Hibbs ran into the street in time to see Kane in his wild, smoky getaway.

In the excitement that followed, Horseshoe Hibbs, with characteristic duplicity, bethought himself of a smart way to rid himself forever of Jake Kane. Of the one man who knew of his guilty complicity in the Storm Mountain affair.

He was ordinarily not a public-spirited man. For that reason, the town was mildly astonished to see a hastily scrawled notice pasted on the front of the bank. It read:

$1,000 REWARD!
For the capture, dead or alive, of Brush Stacy's killer.
(signed) H. S. HIBBS.

Hibbs smiled craftily as he watched a knot of excited citizens reading the notice.

"Mighty slim chance they'll ever bring him in alive," he assured himself. "Jake, he'd prefer hot lead to Chipinka. And judgin' from the temper o' them yahoos, they won't be likely to coddle him none."

The reward promise drew willing recruits for a posse. But Bob Freeland postponed the start until the Loop M herd reached the loading pens. And Marfa dealt with the buyers.

Not until then did he learn that she had returned the twenty-thousand-dollar check to Hibbs.

He remonstrated with the girl.

"That was a fool play, Marfa. It's goin' to cost yuh the ranch."

She didn't seem to hear him. All the spirit had gone from Marfa. Her belated discovery about the silver-framed six-shooter had been closely followed by the greater shock. Kane's ruckus with young Stacy. From the way the onlookers described the shooting, it sounded like cold-blooded murder.

Bob Freeland was young enough, and in love enough, to feel a pang of jealousy at her obvious grief.

"Since yuh've thrown away a chance to save the Loop M, mebbe yuh'll be interested in knowin' who Jake Kane really was. His record," he said meaningly.

Her frayed nerves gave way.

"Now that he's gone, out of the way," she said witheringly, "you take a chance on saying it, is that it?"

The instant that she spoke, she regretted it. Bob Freeland's face went white. He fought back his own temper.

"No man could say that to me, Marfa. That's, I'm a coward." His voice was bitter.

"Action speaks louder than words," she said.

She regretted saying that, too. Bob Freeland stiffened as though struck with a whip.

"Action, that's what he'll git. The boys are ready. Seth Sellers has a dozen men in saddle. With guns and rope. Whichever they use, it suits me."

He whirled away from her. Their talk was staged on the platform beside the loading pens. He started

across towards the street. The girl uttered a stricken appeal:

"Bob! Wait! Listen!"

She wanted to amend her hasty words. But the young sheriff believed that it was a frantic appeal for mercy that brought that cry from her. An appeal in behalf of Jake Kane.

He strode on, without looking back.

With dull, listless eyes, Marfa saw the posse ride out of town. More than a score of heavily armed, grimly determined men. They struck out for the mesa and some of her own riders drew their pay and also joined the pursuit.

She started for the bank. Dull-eyed, she read the reward sign in the window. Hibbs was crossing the street from the direction of the saloon, where he had applauded the posse's departure.

He was in a pleased mood.

"Well, if it ain't the little maid o' Mustang Mesa!" he grinned. "Come right on in!"

HE opened the door and motioned her to enter. They went back to his desk, where the lamp burned dimly. Hibbs nipped the end from a cigar and leaned forward, lighting the smoke over the chimney.

"Well," he said as he got it going, "much as I regret bringin' it up, tomorrow's the day the Loop M mortgage falls due."

She nodded listlessly.

"That's what I'm here about. I'm heading for the ranch tonight. For my personal things."

"Well now, I'm shore glad yuh're takin' it so easy, little gal. After all, wimmen ain't cut out to run a cattle business. Yuh'll be a heap better off elsewhere."

He went to the safe, opened it, and rummaged among some papers. Then he said cautiously:

"Jest to make it legal, Pop Pettis ought to be here," he said. "Seen him around?"

"No."

"The old fool, he—"

An unsteady step sounded in front of the bank. The latch clicked and the door opened. Hibbs closed the safe, stepped past his desk, and peered through a window grating. He uttered a relieved laugh.

"Speakin' o' the devil—" he said.

Pop Pettis lurched past the railing to the desk. He blinked owlishly at Marfa. Hibbs slapped some papers on the desk and thrust a pen into the old saddle-maker's shaky hand.

"Sign here!" he ordered gruffly, pointing.

Pop Pettis pawed his pockets clumsily.

"Lost my glasses agin," he mumbled. "Can't read this here without my glasses. Can't sign without readin' it."

Hibbs stifled an exclamation of impatience.

"Read it to him!" he told Marfa, shoving the papers across to her. "The old soak!"

"Hold on, there, Hosshoe, hold on!" Pop Pettis quavered. "Mebbe I ain't as drunk as yuh think. Can't see fine print, but I see plenty otherwise! Hear good, too!"

Hibbs eyed him sharply.

"What yuh prattlin' about?" he rasped.

The old man laid down the pen and slid himself onto the desk, leaning on one hand, the lamplight highlighting his sodden face.

"I was asleep in the back o' the saloon when it happened. That is, when it started to happen. Woke up to hear that snipe-faced young Stacy rawhidin' somebody. Found me a knothole and seen a man tryin' to brush him away, like a fly. No sir, I wasn't drunk. But Stacy, he was. That feller Kane shoved him, Stacy stumbled and drew. It wasn't murder, like they all claim. He got

one shot in before Kane drawed."

Marfa was suddenly alert.

"Then it was self-defense!" she cried out. "Jake shot in self-defense, is that it?"

Pop Pettis bobbed his head solemnly.

"It most shorely was."

Hibbs was getting fidgety. He picked up the pen and jabbed it into an inkwell again. He made an irritable flourish with it.

"C'mon, here, this ain't gittin' us nowhere!" he said hurriedly. "All this talk about—about a rambunctious stranger."

"Yuh're wrong agin, Hosshoe," declared Pop Pettis. "Kane, he shore is rambunctious. But he ain't such a stranger as some folks thought."

Hibbs pushed the pen into the old man's hand. He appealed to Marfa:

"Make this ol' galoot sign before he gits wallowy drunk agin!"

Marfa ignored him. All her attention was on Pop Pettis.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded. "That Jake Kane wasn't a stranger? What do *you* know about him?"

The old man felt important and showed it. It had been a long time since anybody showed so much interest in what he had to say.

"All I know is what I heerd Sheriff Bob tell old Seth Sellers, when the posse was gittin' organized. He said—"

Hibbs blew up.

"Do we got to listen to you all night, Pettis?" He almost yelled it. "Me, for one, I don't intend to! C'mon, let's git outside!" He took hold of the old man's arm and started to hustle him towards the street.

Marfa sprang in front of them. She blocked the way, her eyes flashing. Her face rigid with determination.

"Keep your shirt on, Hibbs. Let's have it, Pop. What did Bob tell Sellers?"

The sudden excitement had Pop Pettis flustered. He looked from one to the other.

"Kane, he's a ex-con," the old man blurted. "Jest got out o' Chipinka! And he ain't a stranger hereabouts, because he's one o' the two men that—"

Horseshoe Hibbs, in frantic desperation, gave the skinny old arm a sharp, savage twist. Pop Pettis dropped to his knees, his words trailing off in a yelp of pain.

AND then Hibbs stiffened as something hard and cold jabbed him in the ribs. He backed away, appalled as much by Marfa Lamar's flaring anger as by the old Colt she had suddenly drawn.

"Go on, Pop!" she called out.

The old man scrambled up.

"One o' the two men that held up and robbed the Storm Mountain stage ten years back," he finished with a groan. "But what in thunderation made yuh do that, Hosshoe? Yuh had no call to—"

Hibbs' cigar had dropped to the floor. His back was pressed to the edge of his desk, his fingers gripping it. The drawer was in reach. He devoutly wished for the silver-framed six-shooter that was no longer there.

Marfa divined his thought. For bit by bit, the puzzling pattern of recent days and nights was forming a completed picture in her mind.

Hibbs tried weakly to grin.

"Reckon I got over-excited. On account o' him muddlin' up our business affair. Mebbe if we all set down an' cooled off—"

"It's not muddled," Marfa interrupted. "It's getting cleared up, at last!"

"B-but the Loop M mortgage! We—"

"We're going to let that ride for

awhile! And in the meantime, I'm going to do a little riding myself!"

With difficulty, Hibbs mouthed one word:

"Wh-where?"

The girl backed towards the street door. She motioned Pop Pettis to come.

"I'm going to find out," was her parting shot, "just how long and how deep you and Jake Kane were in cahoots!"

Pop Pettis had the door open. She thrust him outside, then slipped out, slamming it. The old man stood open-mouthed as she bolted from the hitch-rail, swung to saddle and dashed away into the night.

She didn't travel the well worn trail to the Loop M home spread. She streaked towards the hills that lifted towards Mustang Mesa and the stars. She breathed a silent prayer that she would find the posse before they found Jake Kane.

CHAPTER VIII

Manhunters

SETH SELLERS was an expert tracker. He had the instincts of a bloodhound. It was his ability in this line that had resulted in the posse's capture, a decade before, of the fugitive stage robber, in his being jailed.

Again, over the same ground, he nosed along dim hoof sign that led to the pinnacles.

"Yuh kin always depend on it," he told Bob Freeland, "a varmint, when it's trailed, tries the same ol' dodge, time after time. Whether that varmint's a cougar, a coyote or a two-legged killer."

"And when yuh corner such a varmint, what then?"

"No predictin' that. Specially in the case of a killer like Kane. He'll be tricky, that's certain."

It seemed that Sellers called the turn right. For a half hour later, on a sun-splashed crag high above them, and just out of gunshot, the fugitive appeared.

He stood, fully revealed. Over his head he waved something white. A handkerchief or fragment of undershirt. Signal for truce or parley.

Bob Freeland called a halt.

"He wants to make talk. To bargain, mebbe."

"He craves a chance to murder anybody that's fool enough to go up there alone!" scoffed Sellers. "It's a old trick!"

He hauled the saddle gun from its boot. He took quick aim, squinting through raised sights and pulled.

The .30-.30 cracked. A puff of white bloomed on the rock, ten yards under the fugitive.

Sellers swore, ejected the empty, and aimed again. Bob Freeland caught his arm.

"He's got the drift o' yore meaning," he said. "Save yore shots." He flung a gesture to the far-flung line of riders, ordering them in.

"What's yore idea?" demanded Sellers.

"Bunchin' the hosses down here. Then gittin' out o' sight, all of us. Wait for a few hours. It'll work on his nerves, the suspense of it. Then I'll start up, snakin' through the rocks."

"That don't go!" objected Sellers. "That thousand o' Hibbs', it looks as good to me as it does to anybody!"

"You kin have it, Seth. Myownself, I wouldn't touch it."

"Yuh won't have a chance to if Kane gits in the first shot!"

Bob Freeland wanted to take his man alive. He wanted to make talk, too. But he couldn't tell Sellers why.

"I'm running this show, Seth. You and the rest o' the boys stay put till I shoot, savvy?"

"Huh, that's a knot-headed notion! It was my own blood kin he killed! I'm for swarmin' up there now! Fast and final!"

The other riders were bunching around them, listening to the talk. Mutinous mutterings came from several.

"We never made this ride to wind up by hidin' under a rock!" vehemently objected one of the men who had seen Stacy killed. "I'm for doin' like Seth says!"

Bob Freeland dismounted.

"If anybody here wants to find who's boss, I'll accommodate him," he challenged. "That's the trouble o' these posse affairs. Folks are always too willin' to take the law into their own hands. My job, it's to go on ahead. That's what I intend to do."

Seth Sellers scowled hostilely. There was a long moment in which anything might happen. Finally he muttered:

"If I was only a few dozen years younger—" He made a gesture of resignation. "All right, boys. If he's dead set on doin' it the hard way." He swung a thick leg over saddle cantle and clumped to the ground.

The posse, during this interval of dispute, was too engrossed to see a lone rider, coming fast across the mesa behind them. But from his lofty viewpoint, Jake Kane saw. And as the lone rider neared, recognition came to him. He remained in view.

Bob Freeland and the posse were out of saddle. And their horses were tied in a brush clump at the foot of the pinnacles when Marfa Lamar dashed past them on a lathery horse. Yards to the west.

The young sheriff ran out, shouting:

"Marfa! Hold on, come back!"

She heard. But his call seemed to spur her on faster. She sent her horse in a mad scramble up the first steep ascent. At a formidable barrier of boulders she dismounted.

Bob Freeland was racing up the slope toward her, still shouting. She paid him no heed. She rushed up, her lithe young legs carrying her nimbly up through the rocks.

Seth Sellers confronted his henchmen.

"We'll be danglin' back to Mustang empty-handed if we don't git busy now!" he whooped. He brandished his saddle gun. "Who's with me?"

THEY started up, heading for a chute that led towards the top. Sellers short legs were not made for such work. He was compelled to call a halt presently.

Jake Kane no longer stood. He had dropped onto the high rock, only his face and head visible, no longer a target. His voice floated down:

"Keep out of it, Lazy S! Stay where yuh are!"

Sellers fired another wild shot. Jake Kane answered with a shot that sent the other ducking for cover. His down-aimed six-shooter was more accurate for the distance than the saddle gun.

Sellers got his wind.

"C'mon, boys!" he shouted. "Up we go!"

Kane's voice came down again, thin and blurred with echoes.

"Call off yore hounds, Freeland! You know why I'm a-sayin' it!"

The young sheriff knew. Or thought he knew. Marfa was high above him, gaining at every leap. In range of the fugitive's gun. And hopelessly out of his own reach, he realized.

He turned despairingly, scrambling across the slope towards the chute where Sellers and the posse ascended. They presently found him blocking their way.

His gun was drawn, resting across

his knees, as he squatted on a shelf of rock.

"Stop, Seth, yuh fool!" he panted strickenly. "Can't yuh see he's got us? With Marfa up there, God knows what a desperate man'll do!"

"If yuh'd listened tuh me in the fust place," Sellers raged back at him, "we wouldn't be in this pickle! It's what comes o' yore shilly-shallyin'! The gal, she poked her head into it herownself! She can't blame us for what happens! We ain't turnin' back, not now!"

"Take one step more, Seth, and I'll not shilly-shally no more!" Bob Freeland's gun swung down on the irate man.

SELLERS took the step. The sheriff's gun jarred echoes from the rock. Sellers leaped as lead smeared a boulder an arm's reach from him.

The rancher's mouth popped open. He turned to the wavering group at his heels.

"Now *there's* something to think of next election! We foller our sheriff on a manhunt! And he shoots at *us* instead o' the man we're after!"

"Yuh won't be votin' next election, Seth, if yuh don't simmer down, sudden!"

There was a movement up near the spot where the fugitive had made his stand. Sellers caught a glimpse of Marfa's bright kerchief.

"Well, she ain't dead yet!" he sneered. "And since yore duty ain't plain to yuh, Sheriff, mebbe I better point it out."

"What are yuh blabberin' about?" Bob Freeland demanded.

"There's a law against connivin' with a hunted criminal! I'd say the gal is a accessory after the fact, wouldn't you, boys?" He didn't wait for their answer. "Yessir, this makes the Lamar kid a accomplice to Brush Stacy's murder! So *now* what d'yuh aim to do, Mister Sheriff?"

Marfa had gained a position at the head of the chute, a little below Jake's rock.

"You'll do just what you're doing, Bob!" she called down. "And keep on doing it!"

"Yuh see?" crowed Sellers.

Marfa swung up a few feet higher. In a low tone, she called out:

"Jake! You hear me, Jake?"

There was no response. But she saw his crouched shadow.

"Get going, Jake!" she went on. "They're after the thousand that Hibbs posted to get you! You won't have a chance if they get you!"

His shadow moved across the face of the rock and a little later Marfa heard faint hoof sounds in a cranny beyond, near the dark, shadowy mouth of a cave.

There was a deep notch in the pinnacles where a determined man could lead a horse, the right kind of a horse, through and down the yonder slope. Opposite the posse.

The hoof sounds receded. Then died away altogether.

But the dispute below was growing louder, more threatening. Marfa waited as long as she dared. Then, when Sellers and the others were on the point of rushing the young sheriff, she drew her Colt, raised it above her head, and emptied it at the sky.

She heard Sellers shriek.

"Whatever the feller aimed to do, he's done it!"

Bob Freeland started up, climbing breathless and frantic. The others close behind him—

She was on Jake's rock when she coolly faced them. Far down on the mesa, no more than a dot in the distance, a roan horse traveled. She pointed.

"By the time you get back to your cavvy, he'll be safe."

"So yuh thought that much over him," Bob Freeland said. His manner was bitter, dejected.

"For an innocent man, any innocent man, yes."

"Innocent!" huffed Sellers. "Him, a stage robber, a—"

"He paid for that," Marfa said. "At Chipinka. That's done and over with." She turned her gaze to the sheriff. "They framed him, Bob. He shot Stacy in self-defense. There was one honest witness."

"Who?" blasted Sellers.

"Pop Pettis."

Sellers was backing up now.

"One hell of a witness, that ol' sot!" he sneered.

"I'd take his word quicker than what yore crowd says," Bob Freeland spoke up unexpectedly.

Sellers' sweaty face purpled.

"Damned if we'll wait till election! A new sheriff, that's—"

"That's jest fine," Bob Freeland broke in. "I'm done with this job when anybody else wants it. Sooner the better."

Marfa's face brightened and she shouldered near to him.

"Oh, Bob! I'm so glad. It's what I've waited so long to hear!" she said happily.

He drew away from her touch and said coldly:

"Yuh'll be hearin' something else mighty soon. Me, I'm sellin' out. Soon as I find a buyer. Then I'm shakin' the dust o' this country off my feet, for good."

He turned and started down for the horses.

The posse followed.

That evening Marfa rode alone back to the Loop M.

CHAPTER IX

Righting Wrongs

IT WAS that perilous, final proof of Marfa Lamar's devotion and trust that completed the transformation of Jake Kane. He had something to live for now. A job to finish. He took fierce pleasure in anticipating the performance of it.

"That skunk Hibbs!" he told himself as he rode for Mustang. "Figgerin' he could wipe me out by offerin' reward money! That settles it! He won't foreclose on the Loop M so long as I'm alive! And I ain't dead yet!"

Exposure was the banker's great-

[*Turn Page*]

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR LAXATIVE NOW SCIENTIFICALLY IMPROVED!

Ex-Lax now better than ever!

People everywhere are praising the new Scientifically Improved Ex-Lax! Thousands have written glowing letters telling of their own experiences with this remarkable laxative.

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EX-LAX NOW MORE GENTLE THAN EVER!

Ex-Lax now has a milder and more comfortable action. Kind to sensitive systems. No shock, no violence, no nausea!

est fear, Kane realized. It gave him the whip-hand.

"It'll cost him fifty thousand instead o' twenty to keep my mouth buttoned shut! And a good lickin', besides!"

IT was close to midnight when Jake Kane saw the lights of Mustang. He had put the roan over a gruelling journey in the hours following his getaway. He spurred it now into a final spurt for the town, and the animal, sensing the rider's will, gave gallantly.

He reached the bank and dismounted with an eager spring. He rushed to the door. No light inside this time. But from the saloon and store fronts across the street, he saw the reward notice pasted on the window.

He struck a match and read. His hard face went lax with wonder.

It had been marked over with a rough, tallying crayon.

It now read:

$1,000 REWARD

For the capture, dead or alive, of the *undersigned.*

H. S. Hibbs.

He shook the door again. This time he noticed that the lock was battered. A padlock and chain held it shut. From the outside.

It was a convincing sign that Hibbs wasn't inside, and that further onslaught on the door would be futile. He gave it a parting kick. Then he hurried across the street to a narrow stairs that led to a loft above a store. And over which hung a sign that he had noticed on his previous, eventful visit to Mustang. The sign read:

J. L. PETTIS
Saddle-maker

He went up the rickety stairs, two steps at a time. At the dark landing was a door. Kane groped for the knob and it turned.

Luck favored him this time. A quavering, sleepy voice came from somewhere in the place, which reeked of tanned leather and stale pipe smoke.

"Who's there?"

"Light up!" Jake Kane called out. "And quit hollerin'!"

He heard the creak of springs and the shuffle of bare feet.

"They back?" came the anxious query. "Daggone, where's a match!"

"Who?"

"Sheriff Bob and the posse. Did they git Kane?"

Jake Kane moved towards the voice. He fingered a pocket for a match. His own supply was low. He found a broken one and struck it on the wall.

"What d'yuh think, old-timer?" he asked as he stepped toward a table lamp. He grinned at Pop Pettis' blinking alarm.

"Take it easy, old-timer," he said as he lifted the chimney from the lamp and touched match to the wick. "And git set to answer a man's questions. Hibbs—where is he?"

Pop Pettis sat down on his cot. He wore a flannel nightgown, hanging buttonless at his scrawny throat, its shrunken length revealing pipe stem legs. He reached down and rubbed a shin.

"S'pose yuh answer a few yoreself. Where's Sheriff Bob? They been hollerin' for him all day."

Kane had a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Why?" he demanded. "Talk up, Pettis! I jest hit town—"

"Natcherly, then, yuh wouldn't know."

Pop Pettis paused.

"Mind tossin' a man his pants? Thanks." He thrust a foot into one twisted leg. "Y'see, the bank didn't open this mornin'. Flock o' buyers who had heavy deposits there, they

got restless. Found out Hosshoe'd bought grub last night at the store. Also a new gun. So they busted in. Got some blacksmith tools and walloped the safe door off. Cleaned out, to the last dime. Couldn't even find the Loop M note and mortgage."

"A cleanup! The low-down, rat-eyed, double-dealin'—"

"Don't strain yoreself. Yuh can't say anything that ain't already been said," Pop Pettis informed him as he struggled with his pants.

"Any idea where Hibbs headed?"

"All the trailin' talent in town went with the posse. Say, now, yuh're showin' a heap o' curiosity in other folks' troubles! For a man that's got plenty o' his own!"

"Listen, old-timer! Skitter downstairs and git me some trail grub! Also a fresh hoss!"

Pop Pettis let go his hold on the pants, which settled down around his shanks.

"What give yuh the idea I'd help a wanted man to dodge the law, anyhow?"

"Git along, *muy* pronto! And when that knot-headed sheriff shows up, tell him to leave Hibbs to me!"

Pop Pettis looked dubious.

"I got me a strong notion that Sheriff Bob'll want to know what yuh intend to do with the bank depositors' money. If and when yuh catch up with Hosshoe. Mebbe I better not git mixed up in this a-tall."

Thinking the matter over, Pop Pettis pulled the boot off. Kane made a gesture of exasperation.

"It's shore uphill work when a man craves to go straight!" he said bitterly. "Yuh're the one man in this town that I figgered didn't think in a groove like the others! Crawl back into yore crawly blankets, yuh old buzzard! I'll play the hand out alone! From now on I'll ask favor of no man!"

He whirled and went for the stairs.

"Hold on, there!" yelped Pop Pettis.

The door slammed and Kane's feet were on the stairs. He couldn't risk being seen and recognized, so he slithered across the shadowy street, mounted the tired roan and left town.

HE struck out for the Loop M. The roan was about finished when he passed the last gate and entered the ranchyard. He unsaddled in front of the corral and turned the roan inside.

"And now," Kane told himself, "I'm addin' a little hoss stealin' to the growin' list o' my crimes."

He took a wide chance on waking the place up as he started the cavvy to circling. He swung a rope twice before he got the yellow mustang.

With forced calm, he inched the splendid animal up to the snubbing post. He had to fight his own impatience as well as the horse.

He got hand on it. It remembered his scent. He soothed it with words and touch. A half hour went before he could lay a halter strap on its neck. Jake Kane had a way with horses, as Marfa had so readily perceived and appreciated. But never before had he tried to exert that gentling process as he did this night.

He would need the best under him to get Horseshoe Hibbs. This wild, hardly broken mustang had the fire and spirit he needed.

He got it to the gate, lowered the bars and led it out to where his saddle and gear were heaped. It quivered and danced at the contact of the saddle blanket. It kicked at the tightening cinch. It struggled against the bit.

But finally it stood, ready for the rider. Kane tied it and hurried across to the cook shack. Shaky Sam was snoring lustily. Kane

grabbed the blankets and jerked them, unrolling the slumbering cook who was wrapped like a cocoon in them.

Shaky started an alarmed yawp. Kane clapped a hand roughly over his mouth.

"Do like I say, and nobody'll git hurt," he gritted. "Here's a pair o' saddlebags. Stuff 'em with rations, *muy* pronto. While yuh're doin' it, fetch me some left-overs out o' the cupboard. How about it?"

Shaky felt the hand leave his mouth. He wanted to howl for help. But that, he realized, would involve unpleasant consequences.

"Well," he piped feebly, "I wouldn't say yes, and I wouldn't—"

Jake Kane jerked him to his feet. "Git busy," he ordered.

He wolfed cold meat, cold coffee and hunks of bread dipped in the coffee. Then he helped himself to Shaky's supply of smoking on a shelf and felt better.

There was a weak smear of dawn in the east when he finished and took the stuffed saddlebags from Shaky.

"Tell the little gal not to worry none," he said as he started across to the corral. "Tell her—tell her we're in a gamble together. A yellow hoss against a bunch o' yellow-backed bills that a yellow coyote vamoosed with. She'll understand. But," he added ominously, "wait till she wakes up before yuh tell her, savvy?"

Shaky gulped and nodded.

"Yuh're the boss," he managed to say. "So far, nobody's told me diff'rent." Then he said: "Hold on, Kane."

Shaky went to his bunk and poked a hand under the mattress. Kane's hand hovered close to his gun butt. The cook might yet have some crazy notion of trying to collect a thousand-dollar scalp.

Shaky's hand came out with a crumpled wad of money. He peeled off a layer of bills and thrust them into Kane's hand.

"Don't know where yuh're headed or why," he said. "But wherever that is, good luck, boss."

Jake Kane was solaced by the thought that the whole world wasn't against him as he went to the yellow mustang, strapped the saddlebags down for a little stormy riding and flung a farewell look across to the darkened ranchhouse.

In the next instant he was in saddle and the cold, early wind was in his face. And he was thankful that the mustang streaked out instead of pin-wheeling in the ranchyard.

The horse was lathered when Kane hauled him down to a walk. For he was soft and corral-stale. But he had speed, power. And as day came and the miles fell behind, man and animal were drawn together in the strange but sure understanding that made them seem a single unit; the man's will, the beast's strength welded together in fast, purposeful travel.

The wilderness engulfed them. A wilderness of frost-withered range where it seemed that only occult power could draw a lone pursuer to his quarry.

CHAPTER X

Hibbs' Hideout

ONE strange but telling thing was that Jake Kane's line of logic was the same as Seth Sellers' had been in the pinnacles manhunt. That is, the habits of the hunted became the axis of his activities; would lead him into a trap.

Kane knew Hibbs' real nature better, perhaps, than any other man. He knew the bandit-banker's old-time haunts, his favored trails, his wily thinking processes.

Before he left the Loop M, Kane's campaign was mapped.

He realized that Hibbs' era of respectability was only part of a patient performance. Like waiting for the Storm Mountain stage to come into view, a decade before. Only with richer rewards waiting at the end.

For ten years Hibbs had planned this cleanup. He therefore had not fled Mustang at random. He had headed for a hideout, just as a coyote, leading a hound pack, sought its hole.

"He never hit for the high places, like me," Kane reflected as he rode. "Hibbs' idea of life insurance was always a deep, brushy canyon. He never did fight in the open."

To the south of Mustang Mesa lay Lonesome Valley. It pierced lava beds, a treeless, waterless badlands. At the valley's lower end was a gorge, gutted by centuries of erosion into the black malpi rock. In the bottoms, beside a mineral creek, an almost impenetrable jungle of catclaw, cactus and mesquite flourished in the rich volcanic ash.

Here a fugitive could creep and hide, with an army hunting him. Here he could lurk until the coming winter made the lava country impassable, then with the first spring thaw slink out and hasten for far places.

Here, Kane knew, his one-time partner had eluded the law ten years before.

So Jake Kane reined the yellow mustang for Lonesome Valley.

Winter, long-delayed, was on the march too, that day. The sun rose behind a bank of clouds. As the day lengthened, a biting wind howled out of the north. The clouds lowered, spread. At noon the sun became a weak blur. Mid-afternoon brought the season's first flurry of snow. Hard, driven pellets that stung the man's hunched back, and he became anxious.

If wind-driven snow filled the crevices and potholes of the badlands, there was danger of the mustang snapping a legbone in the treacherous going. And of its rider perishing in the shelterless waste.

Kane paused only once. To cut a bundle of bunchgrass and tie it behind his saddle.

AT dark he halted again, camping under a low hedge. He was on the edge of the badlands. The space under the ledge contained a deserted rats' nest, built of twigs and spiny ocotillo stems. He lighted it and warmed his bedding ground.

The mustang hovered companionably near. Rope-hobbled and feeding from the bunchgrass the man had plucked, for there was no forage in this barren ground.

Kane divided some bread crusts with it and it ate from his hand. Gentled now, like a pet. Kane dried the saddle blanket by the rats' nest fire and lariat-wrapped it to the mustang's back. He was not given to maudlin sympathies. But he was taking no chances on muscle lameness induced by the cold in a soft horse.

Weariness made Jake Kane oblivious to discomfort and he slept soundly the night through.

Dawn came clear but icy cold. He breakfasted meagerly on Shaky's rations. He saddled and rode on. The purgatory of lava closed in about him. He ascended a hump where the lava was ice-glazed. He dismounted and rolled a smoke and waited till the weak sun brought thaw. His fate depended more on the soundness of his horse than on a few hours of time.

It was painfully slow travel that day. But at sundown Kane reached the rim of Lonesome Valley. The mustang was gaunt and was restless to go on into the sunken oasis where feed grew. But Kane waited until

dusk. If Hibbs was down there, he would be scanning the rim.

Cold rain descended suddenly from dark, scudding clouds, drenching the waiting man and horse. Kane ached with the penetrating chill. But he was glad for the murmur of countless rivulets in the rocks that covered the sound of his descent from the rim.

He staked the mustang on a small grass flat and crawled under a nearby overhanging rock. He dared not risk a fire, which might betray his presence. He hoarded the heat of his breath under a poncho spread tent-like over his head. He dozed between intervals of exercise to send warming blood racing through him. The night was long and when dawn came he led the mustang to a hiding spot in a tumble of rocks at the base of the valley's wall.

The horse shivered, like himself. Kane rubbed it down briskly with his numb, blue hands, pressing the wet from its coat. The sun struck the rocks, radiating a grudging heat.

Kane attacked the last of his saddle rations and was more touched than amused when the mustang sniffed eagerly at a can of beans as he opened it with a knife blade.

With a weary, one-sided grin he emptied the beans out on a rock and tightened his belt a notch as he watched the horse hungrily devour them all.

THEN Kane inspected the action of the silver-framed six-shooter, dried it carefully and cleaned it. He climbed up into the rocks and looked out over the bottoms for smoke sign.

He saw none, for vapors rose from the thickets. He heard no sound but the slow drip in the rocks and the chirp and stir of birds down in the thickets.

But he saw a band of mule deer feeding in a small, open meadow glade over near the creek. The sight of game reminded him of the acuteness of his own hunger. But he dared not stalk them and shoot, for the report would echo through the valley and give Hibbs warning.

At evening, Kane again held vigil for a tell-tale smoke spiral. He felt doubtful misgivings. If Hibbs had fled elsewhere, he would be miles away by spring.

And with the next storm, winter would lay its grip on the badlands. Jake Kane would be a prisoner of the elements.

He dark-camped for another night and at daylight was up in the rocks again. The sun peered over the rim, the birds stirred again, and Nature's endless pageantry ushered in another day.

The deer appeared again in the glade by the creek. There was a plump young forked-horned buck among them. Kane could not endure another day of hunger. He decided to fling caution to the winds and bring his waiting to a swift climax, whatever the cost.

The only alternative was slow starvation.

He crept down from his perch and began a crouching stalk, sometimes crawling through thorny thickets towards the feeding deer.

He reached the edge of the glade. He peered through a tangle of branches. His meat was within easy range. He waited until the forked-horn came in open view, offering a broadside target.

He cocked the six-shooter and made careful aim. At the click, the young buck's head rose, its ears cocked alertly.

It was a perfect neck shot. He pulled, the six-gun jolted smoke and the buck leaped. It dropped to its knees as the rest of the band scattered, then rolled over on its side.

At the instant of shooting, Jake Kane was as startled as the deer. Another shot was timed almost pre-

cisely with his own. And as the young buck toppled over, he saw blood spill from a bullet wound in its ribs.

He had made his neck shot. The deer was hit twice, almost simultaneously. From opposite sides of the glade!

The truth burst upon him. Hibbs, too, had stalked that feeding band. After enduring hunger and privation, and cheerless nights without fire, he had given way to his need for food.

And now the food lay in the glade between them. Neither man dared appear in the open, after it. Neither dared move, for the snapping of a twig might mean a quick spurt from a waiting muzzle, death.

The alarm of gunsound passed, and wild things began their interrupted stir again. Birds scolded from the screeny growth. A small rabbit hopped across the glade. The carcass cooled and stiffened. Black specks wheeled high, circling patiently, came lower. The shadow of keen-scented buzzards flitted over the glade. A coyote yapped somewhere.

Death had brought a second act in the wilderness drama.

The third act was to come. Its outcome dependent on the quickness and sureness of the two actors who had not yet appeared on the scene.

Kane lay flat, gun steadied out in front of him across his left forearm. His eyes, heavy with sleeplessness, ached with his tense, hard scrutiny across the glade.

The suspense became almost unendurable. The hours dragged on and the sun made its slow march. A buzzard, more daring than the rest of its carrion kind, settled awkwardly down to the grass. Peering warily with its naked, loathsome head, it began an ungainly, macabre march around the carcass of the deer. Circling in hungrily.

With slow care Kane eased himself into a new position. He rested for a few moments on his side, closing his eyes to refresh his tiring vision.

When he opened them, his face was momentarily turned upwards and toward the wall of the valley behind him. A sharp, involuntary intake of breath brought a new tenseness to his aching body.

Silhouetted clearly on the rim, against a background of sky, were three riders!

One, mounted on a tall black, Jake Kane had no difficulty in recognizing. But it was not until they began a bold descent that he made out Bob Freeland's two companions.

Shaky, the cook.

And Marfa Lamar!

The buzzard suddenly rose and flapped off. Kane twisted around to the sound. He knew, then, that Hibbs had seen. And moved.

The young sheriff and the girl were ahead of Shaky, who was not a skilled rider. They were coming squarely towards the hidden fugitive's waiting gun.

Kane rose to his knees. He gripped the six-shooter with new determination. He had to act fast, before the man and girl reached the bottoms.

CHAPTER XI

Shooting it Out

WHEN three hours passed after Jake Kane swept out of the Loop M ranchyard on the yellow mustang, Marfa was awakened by a step on the ranchhouse porch. A step that she recognized as Bob Freeland's.

With fluttering heart, she called out to him, leaped from bed and hurriedly dressed. She hoped that

he had come to apologize for his curtness at the pinnacles. To span the gulf of misunderstandings that had widened between them.

The instant that she emerged and saw his face she knew that no such errand had brought him.

"Has he been here—Kane?" he demanded bruskly.

"Why do you ask that?" the girl countered.

"The Mustang Bank, it's cleaned out. Hibbs has vamoosed. And from what Pop Pettis said, Kane is tailin' him!"

"You think they're in—in cahoots, is that it? In spite of that thousand Hibbs offered for—"

"The thing's this!" the young sheriff snapped. "If Kane catches up with Hibbs before I do, he'll shore make a play for the money! Close onto fifty thousand, if it's a penny!"

"I don't believe it!" the girl retorted. "But here's one sure thing, Bob—if you're tailing Jake Kane, I'm tailing you!"

She leaped down from the porch and ran towards the corral. Freeland followed, remonstrating. At the gate she halted, eyes searching the cavvy inside.

"The yellow mustang—it's gone!" she cried.

FROM the cook shack door, Shaky had been doing some high-powered listening. The sheriff saw him. And he was quick to note the guilty start of the cook when their eyes met.

"How about it, pot knocker?" he shouted. "Was Kane here?"

Shaky began his usual hesitant answer.

"Well, Sheriff, I wouldn't say yes, and I wouldn't say—"

Bob Freeland whirled on Marfa.

"So that's it! Harboring a fugitive! Helpin' him skip the country! And incidentally makin' the chances mighty small for recoverin' the bank cleanup!"

The girl sighed despairingly.

"There you go, Bob. Just as I've said so many times. The law job changes a man; it's changed you. Suspicious, blind to any facts. To real justice, for that matter! I haven't seen Jake. But I want to. I'm riding with you."

Shaky had ambled over to the corral. He was unknotting his apron.

"Ain't no reason for me to hang around here, with the outfit pared down to the core," he stated. "I'm ridin', too. Beside which, I never did trust that jigger Hibbs. That's why I kep' my money out o' his bank!"

Thus when Bob Freeland left the Loop M, Marfa and Shaky cockleburred onto him, ignoring his protests.

As it turned out, Shaky was a helpful member of the expedition.

"Now if I was in Hibbsy's boots, I'd keep fur's possible from the posse. I'd ride plumb in the opposite direction. He knowed the posse was to the north. On the mesa. So it's ten to one he headed south, Sheriff."

"Into the badlands?"

"And beyond!"

Marfa saw hoofprints. She alighted and examined them. Bob Freeland's eyes were on her face when she straightened.

"The mustang's tracks," she said.

"And headed south!" crowed Shaky. "Look's like Kane figgered same as me!"

"Then Kane *did* come to the ranch after clearin' out o' town!" the sheriff said accusingly. "Come clean, Shaky! What do yuh know?"

"Well, Sheriff, he—I rationed him for a long ride. He didn't mention Hibbs, exactly. Jest said he was after a yaller coyote, and to tell Marfa here that they was in a gamble together, him and her."

The girl shot a triumphant glance at Bob Freeland.

"That doesn't sound like he in-

tended to steal the bank money, Bob. You'll admit that, won't you?"

The sheriff's suspicion melted a little.

"Well, I reckon he feels some gratitude to yuh. But whether it's enough to make a man like him turn honest, I plumb doubt that."

MARFA longed to tell Bob Freeland why she wanted to see and talk to Jake Kane. She was convinced that he and Hibbs were—or had been—linked in some secret enterprise. But she couldn't bring herself to confiding in him when he was so hostile to her own views.

The whole affair was bewildering. The one way to clear it all up was to find Kane. To question him about the silver-framed six-gun.

Recent frosts had worked the ground like yeast and made tracking easy. They followed the mustang's hoofmarks until night halted them, still miles behind.

Again Shaky demonstrated his usefulness. He had brought food. They camped, suppered and spent a trying night hovering close to a wind-swept fire.

It was next afternoon before they reached the spot where Kane had camped on the edge of the badlands. By now Bob Freeland realized where their trail led.

"Lonesome Valley, that's where he's headed. And here's where you turn back," he told Marfa. "It's not goin' to be any picnic from here on."

The girl was trail weary but more determined than ever.

"I didn't come picnicking, Bob." That was all she said. So into the badlands the three of them went.

In dry season, they never would have made it. But the storm had filled the potholes. With water at frequent intervals, their mounts were equal to the ordeal.

And at length they reached the valley's bleak rim and rode down to the promise of feed and abundance below. Haggard and hollow-eyed, their need was greater than any consideration of caution.

Nearing the bottom, Marfa saw the yellow mustang. She called out to Bob Freeland and pointed.

He halted and turned. And in that instant gunfire broke out at the edge of the chaparral, close below him.

Bob Freeland's smoldering suspicion flamed into certainty. Jake Kane was the killer breed. He was shooting it out with the law.

Without dodging or hesitating, the young sheriff spurred down towards the gunshots. He scorned the danger of that reckless, open approach. To protect Marfa was the impulse that drove him down into that charge that few men would have dared.

When a stone's throw from a tangle of mesquite he glimpsed the man he had hunted so long, so enduringly. Kane was half hidden in the growth. He was kneeling. The silver-framed six-gun glinted in his hand, smoke curling upward from its muzzle.

Bob Freeland fired. Three rapid shots cut the thicket and leaves filtered down.

Kane flung himself forward. Somewhere ahead of him, the heavy, jolting roar of a .45 sounded twice.

He fell. But his arm came up. The silver-framed gun cracked once. Bob Freeland heard a hoarse, agonized cry. The cry of a mortally hit man.

It wasn't until then that the young sheriff realized, with sickening suddenness, that he had not been the target for Jake Kane's gun.

He heard Marfa coming down behind him. And Shaky sending a young rockslide behind her as he closely followed.

Bob Freeland spurted into the thicket, braving the punishing thorns and flung himself from leather. He

was kneeling at Jake Kane's side when Marfa got to them.

The man on the ground stirred a little and looked up into their faces. He tried to grin but the effort ended in a grimace of pain. A crimson patch was widening on his shirt front.

Bob Freeland raised his head.

"If yuh got anything to say, Kane, start sayin' it," he said.

Kane made a weak motion with one hand.

"He—he's yonder," he breathed weakly. "I got him—in time—before he potted yuh, like he did yore—yore dad."

Marfa had the dying man's hand now and great tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Then it *was* Hibbs! That time at Storm Mountain?"

Jake Kane nodded. Death was written on his scarred, unshaven face. His eyelids drooped over glazing eyes. They swerved towards Bob Freeland.

"Hear that, youngster?" he whispered.

"Then—then it wasn't—" Bob Freeland gasped. He didn't finish. But he flung an eloquent glance at Marfa. "It wasn't—" He couldn't bring himself to say it. To speak the name of Tom Lamar.

Jake Kane, with his waning strength, shook his head slowly back and forth. Shaky crashed through the undergrowth to them.

"It was Hibbs, all right!" Shaky blurted. "And he's in bad need o' buryin'!"

A tremor shook the dying man. His hand tightened in Marfa's warm, comforting clasp. He tried to smile again.

"How about makin' that a—a double order, Shaky?" he murmured haltingly.

The cook was sniffling unashamedly. He sleeved his eyes.

"I—I wouldn't say yes," he mumbled.

Kane's breath was coming short. With a final, farewell pressure of Marfa's hand, he raised it and laid it in Bob Freeland's.

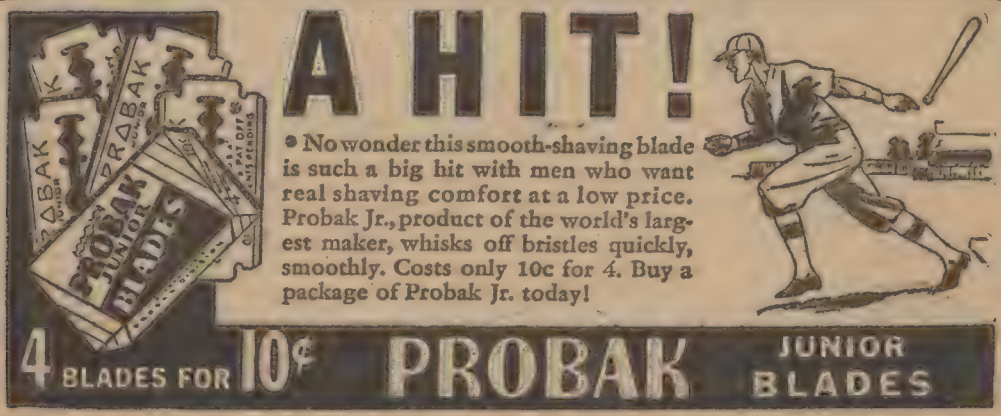
"I wouldn't say no, little gal—not if I was you—not any longer—"

Jake Kane died smiling, just as the crickets started their evening song. With his rough, worn hand resting on theirs, as though in a parting blessing.

A great sob shook Marfa. Bob Freeland drew her gently against him. His lips brushed her hair. Her face lifted to meet them.

Shaky blew his nose loudly and discreetly turned away.

Next Month: RODEO QUEEN, *a Romantic Novel of Prairie Sweethearts, by* LARRY A. HARRIS



Wedding Day Guns

She burst inside, her heart pounding with fright

Julie Brannon's Romance Blooms in the Midst of a Bitter Feud

By FRANK CARL YOUNG

Author of "The Sixth Bullet," "After Sundown," etc.

IT WAS early evening at the Circle B ranchhouse. On the veranda steps outside, Julie Brannon cupped her pointed little chin in her hand and stared dreamily across the wide valley to the purpled ridges that divided Brannon grass from what had once been Pitt pasture.

A deep sigh slipped from the girl's soft lips, and into her clouded grey eyes crept an expression of hunger that had appeared there often. For it wasn't the first time that she had sat thus and wondered when Gary Pitt would return.

"Five years is like five lifetimes," she murmured, a tinge of desperation in her voice. "But he promised, and Gary never could break a promise to me."

She turned her gaze to the long-limbed roan hitched at the rack at the end of the porch. The brand ML on its flank sent a tremor through her, and she tried to think of things more pleasant. For that brand was Morrel Lehmont's, the man who now occupied the Pitt ranchhouse. He had known her father since Julie was a baby. And at the moment he was inside talking with her father, a practise that was becoming more frequent than ever.

"Yuh'll make her understand or else, Brannon!"

JULIE gave a nervous start as Morrel's voice, hot with anger, came through the screen door. It was not the first time she had heard Lehmont threaten her father. And, as always, Brannon had little to say. Though she questioned her father frequently, he never had revealed why he allowed Lehmont to harass him so vehemently.

But this was the first time Julie realized that she herself was involved in the conversations. What could it be that her father must make her understand? Was it the thing she had often pleaded with him to tell her? Was it the answer to the threat that Morrel seemed constantly to wield over him?

She was about to rise and go inside when the heavy tread and jingling of spurs told her that Morrel was leaving. A moment later he shouldered his hefty way through the door and came to an abrupt halt beside her.

Julie swallowed convulsively. A chill went through her as she felt the presence of the tall, raw-boned figure hovering above her. Suddenly she found Morrel sitting beside her, his black Stetson tilted back over his bristly black hair, his cold, watery eyes fastened hungrily on her hunched little figure.

"Dreamin' like a plain ornery fool again, eh?" he chortled scornfully, then slid his hulk close to her so that she was pinned between him and the veranda column. "Why don't yuh git sense, Julie, an' give me some o' them hungry looks that yuh hand out free to them ridges? I ain't as cold as them. Why, gal, yuh don't know how warm-hearted Morrel Lehmont kin be!"

To prove his statement, he suddenly threw one of his huge arms around Julie's shoulder and pulled her close to him. His free hand, thick and calloused, pawed at her chin to tilt it, to bring the tightening lips within inches of his own.

Julie's heart pounded up into her throat. Her breath came in gasps, and her grey eyes gleamed with fright. In that moment a vision of Gary flicked into her mind, the memory of their promise as they parted in the clearing beside the Pitt line-shack on the ridge. And now this beast—

Slap!

She put every bit of her range-bred strength into the blow. It caught Morrel full in the mouth, jerked back his head. His eyes blazed, and an oath blurted from his twisted lips.

"Yuh little hell-cat! Figger I ain't good enough fer yuh, eh? Well, git this, Julie. Some day yuh're gonna beg me to marry yuh, damned if yuh don't!" He rubbed the back of his fist against his stinging mouth. "Else I'll make yuh so ashamed o' bein' a Brannon that yuh'll crawl at the feet of a dozen ranchers hereabouts an' beg forgiveness!"

His words hardly seemed to make sense. Julie was completely oblivious

to everything except the drum-tight tenseness and anger that filled her being.

"Get off this ranch, Morrel!" she cried, jumping to her feet. Her eyes blazed, and her disheveled brown hair was a shimmer of brightness about her slender shoulders. "Get off before I get a gun and shoot you off!"

Morrel rose stiffly, a scornful leer curling his thick lips. Hitching up his faded overalls, he yanked down his Stetson and vaulted into saddle.

"Yuh'll come beggin' yet, Julie!" he called meaningly, and thundered down the slope to the lush-grassed valley. Beyond the purpled foothills lay the old Pitt spread, the holdings that he now possessed.

THE moment Morrel was gone, Julie sank down helplessly against the veranda column. Gone was the tenseness, the hot anger that had kept her defiant. In its place was a deep, brooding fear. What could be making Morrel so confident, so sure of her? Why did he deliberately refuse to understand that she could never care for him? What terrible secret did he possess that gave him such extraordinary power?

Her eyes unconsciously swung to the distant ridges across the cattle-dotted valley. High among them was tucked a tiny line-shack—the rendezvous of five years ago. It was a humble, unpainted shack, but it had never seemed anything other than beautiful and glorious to Julie; a place of enchantment and charm.

"Gary, you must come back—now!" her trembling lips murmured. "You must!"

But she wasn't sure. There had been nothing in the five years to give sign that he would return. He had promised, and that was all. He had sworn his love then, assured her that he would never forget; that when the fortunes of his father were better, he would return. But in five years a man could meet—

"Julie, please come inside."

Her father's voice seemed to come from afar, breaking in on the spell of memory that bound her. She rose wearily to her feet, went inside.

He was slumped in a rocking chair, a big-framed figure old before his time, with a shock of reddish-brown hair turning grey at the temples. Between his grim, sucking lips was a fuming pipe, its biting smoke pinching his wide grey eyes to watery slits. He didn't look up when Julie came and sat on the arm of his chair; instead, he continued to squint through the smoke haze, at visions that only he could see.

"Yuh shouldn't a' slapped Morrel, honey," he said in the deep voice that Julie loved to hear. It was that voice which had always banished whatever fears, whatever small sorrows she had known. "He'll only make yuh regret it."

Julie looked at him. The vivid flecks of fear in his narrowed, staring eyes alarmed her. And never before had she seen him grind on his pipe stem so fiercely, or beat his fingertips so nervously on the arm of his chair.

"Why shouldn't I, Dad?" she asked. She swung around and planted herself on his lap, her inquisitive, devoted eyes searching his for the mystery that she knew must lay behind them. "You never regret slapping a man like Morrel. I never liked him, and you know it. I'm sure you'd be glad if he never came again. Now if that had been Gary Pitt—"

Tod Brannon touched his daughter's soft cheek with a calloused, work-hardened hand and turned pity-stained eyes on her.

"Julie, honey, it kin never be Gary for you," he murmured softly, a bit

pleadingly. "Yuh'd best put him outa yore heart for good. When the Pitts lost their ranch five years ago, yuh lost a childhood sweetheart for all time. Yuh see, child, they were driven out. They won't come back!"

Julie stared blankly. She rose, stood gaping down at her father, her grey eyes wide with amazement.

"Driven out?" she echoed hollowly, her fingers at her throat as if to stifle the lump that suddenly gathered there. "Why, I always thought they had—oh, Dad, why didn't you tell me this before? Why were they driven out?"

A frown gathered Brannon's forehead into a knot of deep lines. He did not answer. Rising, he tapped out his pipe, then headed for his room. His thin lips seemed sealed against answers to her questions, but when he reached the door he turned, and Julie read the pain and fear in his eyes.

"Honey, fer yore own sake, will yuh jest try to be nice to Morrel from now on?" His voice was tense with emotion. "Mebbe yuh'll be able to find somethin' in him worthwhile that'll make it easier for yuh when he asks yuh to marry him. Jest try to git along with him fer a while, won't yuh, child?"

THERE could be no sleep for Julie that night. Her mind was a vortex of whirling emotions. The Pitts had been driven out! *When* Morrel asked her to marry him! Gary would never come back!

She felt trapped, bewildered. It was impossible for her to reason the correct course to follow. Something was being held back from her, something she wasn't supposed to know, something her father didn't *want* her to find out!

She realized that it must be for her own good. Tod Brannon's love for his daughter was surpassed only by the love she held for him. She would do anything for him. She would even try to be decent to Morrel because he asked it.

Going to her room, she changed to cotton blouse and levis. As she rode from the ranchyard, the night breeze was cool and refreshing on her hot flushed face. Almost instinctively, she turned the mouse-colored mare toward the old line-shack where she and Gary had met when they were seventeen. It had beckoned her often, and it called her strongly now. For it would be easier to think where the memory of Gary was strongest.

It was late, and the moon rode high, when Julie finally climbed the mare to the summit of the ridge. Reaching the tree-canopied shack, she dismounted among the ghostlike birches and sought the broad tree stump she knew so well.

Suddenly a beam of light flickered across the clearing. Julie jerked erect and glanced swiftly toward the hut. Through the one window she could see someone moving about inside, carrying a lantern. Surprised, she rose from the stump and started toward the door to investigate. At that moment it opened.

A tall, rangy, narrow-waisted man with wide shoulders and lean, sharp features stood in the doorway. Held chest-high was a lantern, its unsteady beams revealing deep, somber eyes that peered at her with an onrush of surprise and displeasure.

A flood of hot blood rushed to Julie's temples, and for an instant she swayed.

"Gary!" she cried uncertainly, her trembling arms outstretched to touch him. "Gary, you—you did come back!"

But he neither touched her nor smiled. She immediately sensed his aloofness, the coldness that wreathed him. For a moment she believed that he didn't recognize her.

"It's—it's Julie!"

His voice came like a drone of sound out of the past, familiar, yet iced with hatred. "I heard a hoss out here. Didn't figure on findin' you, though."

He didn't even use her name! Julie dropped her arms, a chill quivering through her.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Gary?" she asked, her heart crying out to be close to his, to feel his arms around her.

The lantern trembled just a little as he lowered it and turned around. For an instant she believed he was going to close the door in her face. Then:

"Come inside, Julie," he said resignedly.

She followed him into the familiar two-room shack and watched him place the lantern on the scarred table. He paused for an instant above it, his face outlined sharply in its light.

He was older, she could see; his features were set and rigid, his eyes flooded with a strange agony that she couldn't understand. Truly, this wasn't the light-hearted Gary Pitt of old.

Motioning her to sit down, he took out the makin's and carefully fashioned a cigarette. Above the lighted match his eyes stared into space, as if he saw ghosts parade out of the past and stalk in that little room. Then he tossed the match on the floor and stepped heavily on it.

"I had hoped that I wouldn't see yuh, Julie, but I knew that I would," he began slowly, carefully, as if weighing each word. "Yuh mustn't misunderstand why I came back. It isn't because o' what I promised five years ago. But it is because o' what yore father did to mine at that time. It was somethin' I didn't know then. Yuh see, yore father drove mine from our ranch. He—"

"Gary, you must be mad—" Julie interrupted.

"Please, Julie," he said angrily. "Yore father wanted the Pitt ranch. He was rich, and it was easy to buy Dad's notes from the Ralson bank an' short-term 'em. After that we moved south; an' my Father died a broken man two years ago. I learned the truth when I found a small notebook he usta keep."

Julie met his gaze unflinchingly.

"So you've come to get even with my Father," she said, rising and facing him squarely. "And I thought you'd come back for me."

"I came back to git the Pitt ranch. And I'll git it by any method I find convenient. That's the way yore father did!"

She took a quick step toward him, then caught herself and drew back. Gary's face was hard as stone, his eyes strange, icily determined.

"I think I understand," she said, fighting down the ache in her throat. "But I must ask you one question. Gary, have you forgotten those days together so many years ago? Have you?"

FOR several seconds there was a stillness that seemed to envelop the whole universe. Julie's ears ached from the thunder of it, and she thought she would scream. Then Gary spoke, the words coming almost painfully.

"I can't remember anything except how my Father died," he said, his voice cold.

He lifted the lantern from the table, turned to the door and waited. He wanted her to go!

As Julie brushed past him, a cry lifted to her lips and she had to fight it down with the back of her hand. When she reached the moonlit clearing, she half turned and spoke over her shoulder:

"You shall have your ranch, Gary."

Later, in the darkness of her room, Julie fought vainly against her love for Gary. If she could only bring herself to hate him as he did her, her course would be easier. But it was an impossibility. For at the sight of him again, the love she had only dreamed about became a powerful thing of reality. It was as impossible to stamp it from her heart as to wipe colors from the rainbow.

With the coming of dawn, she rose from a troubled sleep and went downstairs to greet her father. He noticed at once the strain written plainly upon her face.

"Dad, I—I've learned something dreadful—" Julie stammered as she sat down opposite him at the breakfast table. "You—forced the Pitts to leave their ranch, didn't you?"

Tod Brannon paled. The coffee-cup near his lips jerked so violently that the brown liquid nearly spilled over.

"How do you know?" he asked, his rich voice suddenly a trembling thing. "Morrel?"

"Gary Pitt," she replied quietly. "He's back, Dad, just as he promised. Only—it's not for me. It's the ranch."

"Pitt!" Brannon exclaimed. "Yuh mean to say he's back to—" He suddenly squeezed tight his eyes, as if to shut out a terrible vision. "Julie, he didn't tell you everything."

A WAVE of relief passed over the girl as she saw that at last her father meant to confide in her. She *should* know, should be able to give him the comfort he seemed to need so sorely. Leaving her seat, she went to his side and tenderly lifted his bristled, square chin.

"Tell it all to me, Dad," she said. "I'll understand."

Tod Brannon took a deep breath and plunged.

"Yuh see, Julie, I'm not really yore father! God believe me, but I tried hard enough to be one. I had to, for it was I who killed yore father, killed the man who shoulda raised yuh into the lovely woman that yuh are. But he—yore father—never coulda done that. He was lower than a rat!"

Julie gasped at that, and Tod Brannon quickly laid his calloused hand on her trembling shoulder. His eyes were beseeching her to understand.

"I never wanted yuh to know all this, honey. I've tried for years to keep it from yuh, doing and givin' everything I own so that you wouldn't learn the secret. Yuh see, Morrel knows the story too, an' he's held it over my head ever since it happened. But now that Gary's come back, in spite o' Morrel's great power an' what power I have left, I reckon it best for yuh to know the truth.

"Julie, I loved yore mother desperately. When I heard that yore father—he ran a saloon in Los Lunas—was subjectin' her to every form of hell on earth, I rode to Los Lunas an' shot up everything in the dive he ran. In the midst of it, someone's lead found yore mother on the stairs with you in her arms.

"After seein' her fall, I didn't remember anythin' until Morrel, who was in the place an' kept clear, finally tore my fingers from yore father's throat an' told me to git goin'. I did, but I picked yuh off the floor as I went. And today, the man yuh've been callin' yore father is still the outlaw Breyson, charged with the massacre in Golfar's Saloon in Los Lunas.

"Julie, yuh've been raised by an outlaw—an' Morrel Lehmont knows it. He used that weapon to force me to git the Pitt ranch for him years ago. An' now—now Morrel wants the deed to *you!*"

Julie was speechless. Her only emotion was a flood of pity for the man who sat with bowed head be-

side her. She felt no shame, couldn't conceive why she should. She was proud to have called this man Father for all these years.

Stooping, she kissed the silvered hair of Tod Brannon and ran upstairs to her room.

She knew there was no hope in fighting Morrel by force. He had men on the old Pitt ranch born to the gun and anxious to use it. And her father had been—was—helpless before him.

Her course became clear. There were only two men in the world she loved. Each had given her all the happiness she had ever known. In turn, she had but to give of herself to bring happiness to them. One word would do it.

She dressed quickly for riding and without stopping to allow herself time for further thought, saddled her mare and swung from the ranchyard.

In her heart a dull ache mounted to torturing pain as she drew nearer the old Pitt ranch which Morrel now owned and occupied with a mixture of gunmen and punchers. For with every step of the way she was drawing further from the hope of ever having the one thing in life she wanted.

A gleaming black horse was tethered at the rack before Morrel's ranchhouse when Julie arrived. It bore a brand unknown to her, and she wondered vaguely who the visitor might be. And then Morrel himself was opening the door for her.

"This don't make sense," he told her, surprise clear on his heavy features. He drew her into a side room and closed the door. "The way yuh acted last night gave me a different idea. Mebbe I didn't figger yuh right."

Julie chilled under his impudent gaze. But, bolstered by her resolution she returned his stare and allowed him to advance toward her.

"You want me, don't you, Morrel?" she asked, quivering under the touch of his hand on her arm. "Want me real bad, too, don't you?"

"It takes yuh a long time to find things out," he replied, immediately slipping his arm around her waist. "I've been tellin' yuh that fer more than two years. I want yuh more than anythin' I've got!"

"Well, you can have me."

Morrel Lehmont had not risen to power through dull-wittedness. He knew that everything gained in life cost a price—unless you were cunning enough not to pay it. And if Morrel was anything, he was clever.

"Yuh ain't foolin' me none, Julie. What is it that *you* want?"

"The deed to this ranch my Father got for you."

MORREL'S black eyes burned into Julie's. His encircling arm tightened about her waist with a savage fierceness. The very closeness of her, the smell of her hair and her warm breath on his face drove from him every other desire except one—to possess Julie Brannon. The ranch was a small enough price to pay. He did not care why she wanted it.

"Fair enough," he said.

Releasing her, he went to a huge safe in the corner and opened it. A moment later he released his ownership by signature and handed the deed to Julie, his eyes glowing anxiously, hungrily.

"Thanks," she said.

As she was about to place the deed in her pocket, Morrel suddenly caught her fiercely to him. With his arms nearly crushing the breath from her, his hot lips inches from hers, Julie closed her eyes and forced herself to accept his kisses.

"I've got to leave now," she told him abruptly, turning to the door.

"Jest a minute, Julie," he said quickly. "I'm headin' fer El Paso on Sunday on business. I want to be

a married man before then, 'cause I aim to have company down there. We kin be married on Saturday. That'll give yuh today an' tomorrer to git yore things together. Yuh won't have any objections to that, I know."

Julie nodded. It was impossible for her to utter even a word. It was all she could do to hold back her tears until she got out of that room. Mounting her mare, she thundered home, her heart nearly bursting with shame.

THAT night, as the sun slid behind the purple western ridges Julie rode slowly toward the old line-shack where Gary was now putting up. The last time she would ever ride there!

As she swung into the tiny clearing, she pulled the mare back on its haunches in surprise. About a dozen horses lined the edges of the clearing, and from the shack came the sound of many voices.

Her first concern was Gary. Had Morrel learned of his whereabouts and come to gun him out? Were he and his hirelings now inside exulting in their triumph? Was she too late?

Slipping from saddle, she ran to the shack. She shoved the door open with her shoulder and leaped inside, her face flaming with anger, her hair a wild tangle about her head.

"Gary! Gary, what are they going to—" she cried, then stopped stock still, almost sobbing with relief. For Gary was standing in the middle of the room, quite unhurt, and he was surrounded by men she had never before seen; men clean-cut and clear-eyed. The group seemed to have been talking, earnestly and with purpose, for their faces were still serious.

"I think you boys need a little air," Gary said significantly.

As the men moved outside, Julie struggled to regain her lost composure. Standing on the opposite side of the table from Gary, she kept her eyes hungrily on him. She would engrave his image on her heart, for this was the last time she would ever see him.

She was the first to break the silence.

"I promised you your ranch, Gary." She withdrew the deed from her pocket and handed it to him. "There it is, without the slightest incumbrance of any sort."

His utter unconcern in accepting it puzzled her. He even failed to look at it. Fleetingly she wondered if he was really so anxious to get the ranch back, after all.

"I reckon that means I won't need those boys outside," he said slowly. She noticed then how unsteady his voice was, and that he did not meet her eyes. "Thanks, Julie."

She knew what he meant. The men she had seen were his own followers, men he had been ready to lead against her father or whoever else stood in his way. Julie's heart was gladdened to know that Gary Pitt was the kind who would fight back hard for the things that were his!

For one more instant she gazed longingly at his face, memorizing every detail of it. Then she turned abruptly and moved to the door.

"Good-by, Gary."

The door closed behind her with the sound of doom. As she walked slowly toward her mount, her ears ached for the sound of his step. If he would only call her back—at least bid her farewell.

But Gary Pitt never answered.

SATURDAY morning—her wedding day! Julie rose a little later than usual. She made no particular preparations, just dressed with her usual care, in a simple white frock. Giving the room a last loving glance,

she went downstairs to breakfast with her father.

"Morrel will be here soon," Brannon said, his voice strained. "I jest seen some o' his boys lopin' down the valley. Julie, now that yuh know the truth, yuh don't have to do this thing. I don't want—"

A smile and a determined shake of her head was her only response. She ate in silence, slowly, deliberately. Fifteen minutes later the quiet of the ranchyard was split by the wild yells of Morrel's men riding in. It was plain from their bloated faces and bloodshot eyes that they had been celebrating in town the night before.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Julie walked to the buckboard beside her father, through the lane of shouting gunmen. Only a few of the Brannon boys were present, for there was little affection between the two outfits.

"A damn fine mornin' fer a weddin', Brannon," purred Morrel. He helped Julie and her father into the wagon, then mounted his gaudy-saddled bay. "Julie, yuh're shore a lucky gal!"

Neither Julie nor Tod Brannon answered. The buckboard moved down the lane, Morrel's men siding it and strung behind. Their raucous voices filled the girl with a loathing she could scarcely control, and at last she begged Morrel to keep them quiet.

He shrugged and patted her hand. "Let them be, Julie. The boys are jest havin' a little fun. This is a weddin', not a funeral, yuh know!"

As they mounted a shoulder of the ridge five miles from the ranch, Brannon suddenly yanked back hard on the reins. Julie gasped, stared in amazement at the line of horsemen strung across the narrow road, blocking it.

Here were the same clean-cut men whom she had seen at the line-shack two nights before! And in the middle of the road, just a little ahead of the others, Gary Pitt sat a gleaming black horse.

Julie's breath caught as she watched Morrel ride forward. The deadliness of his gunmen was a known fact. And why was Gary here? What did he mean to do? It was impossible for her to believe anything except that he had come to force the issue between himself and her father. There *couldn't* be any other reason, knowing how much he hated Tod Brannon and herself.

HER eyes were riveted on Morrel's back, on his gun arm, crooked above his holster. Tod Brannon's lips stirred, but no sound escaped them. His fingers on the reins tightened until the knuckles showed white.

Morrel had come within horse-length of Gary, and he stopped there.

"What's the meanin' o' this, Wilson?" he demanded. "A holdup, 'cause I didn't start yuh right away on that job yuh asked me for the other day?"

Gary glanced at Morrel's hovering gun arm, then to his own hands folded on his saddle-horn. A crooked smile twisted his lips; Morrel believed that he was Wilson, a waddy in search of a job. The Gary Pitt of five years ago meant nothing to him as he looked at this bearded, lean man.

"No holdup, Lehmont," Pitt grinned. "Jest aimin' to go to a weddin', that's all."

Morrel's features brightened. Nice of the feller, wanting to join the festivities.

"Come along, then," he chuckled, swinging the bay around to rejoin his men. "There'll be plenty o' room, I reckon."

"But yuh're not goin'," came Gary's mild voice.

Morrel instantly pulled the bay

back on its haunches and swung around. Julie's heart leaped, and she stood up on the wagon-boot, her eyes wide and fear-stricken.

"Gary, don't—" she screamed.

Morrel's men, aware that trouble was brewing up ahead, began to file past the wagon.

"Who says I'm not goin'?" demanded Morrel, his eyes slits of fire. "I'm the man she's marryin'!"

"Yuh're wrong, Lehmont. I'm the man," Gary answered quietly. "Yuh're not goin' anywhere—except to hell! And I'm sendin' yuh there. Yuh shoulda put thicker walls in the Pitt ranchhouse when yuh got it from Brannon. I heard enough the other day to know yuh for the lowest kind o' doublecrossin' skunk that crawls!"

FOR a second Morrel stiffened as if strapped to a steel rod. Then his hand slapped the butt of his gun.

"Damn yuh, Wilson!" he shouted.

His crashing gun brought a dozen more from their holsters. Morrel's men were backing him up.

Gary jerked in the saddle. From his hip flashed a cone of flame.

Morrel dropped his gun and clutched blindly for the bay's long mane. His weakened fingers missed it, and he pitched out of the saddle to the ground.

Julie screamed when she saw Morrel's gunnies spread out, their guns pouring lead at Gary and his men. They were sure to cut him down. He hadn't a chance.

"Sit down, Julie! Yuh'll git hit!" cried her father.

He was swinging the buckboard around as he spoke, and he drove it behind a clump of trees, out of range. Flinging the reins to Julie, Brannon leaped from the boot, his six-gun bucking in his fist as he ran, his eyes ablaze.

For five minutes the guns of the two outfits roared out their dirge of hate and death. And for those five minutes Julie's hot, feverish eyes stared through the group of trees at the circling, whirling horsemen.

And then there was silence, above which came only the sound of her gasping breath. Her eyes darted to the fringe of trees. Two men were walking toward the buckboard.

She couldn't believe it at first. It didn't seem right that she should suddenly feel so happy. A broken sob of gladness gushed from her lips and she was laughing hysterically when her father and Gary came up to her.

"—an' that's the whole story of it, Gary," she heard her father say. "I've loved her too much to see her hurt. But yuh've ended all that, son." Then Gary turned to Julie.

"Julie, yuh oughta hate me for the way I've acted," he said. "Even before I heard anything at Morrel's, I tried to keep myself hatin' you an' yore father. But I couldn't. I never shoulda tried. Yuh see, I'm in lo—"

Julie, laughing through her tears, interrupted him. "It was foolish of me to get dressed for a wedding when there isn't going to be one."

Gary took the cue instantly. The bitter look disappeared from his eyes, to be replaced by joy and hope. He was grinning.

"Didn't yuh hear me say a while back that I was goin' to a weddin' today?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Didn't yuh hear me say that I was goin' to be the man?"

"Yes."

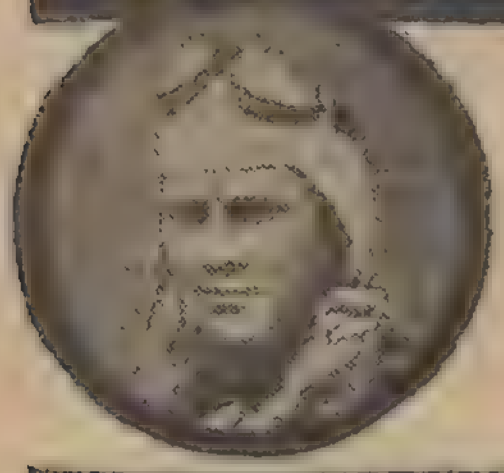
"Well, then, why shouldn't there be a weddin'?"

"We haven't had a rehearsal, Gary."

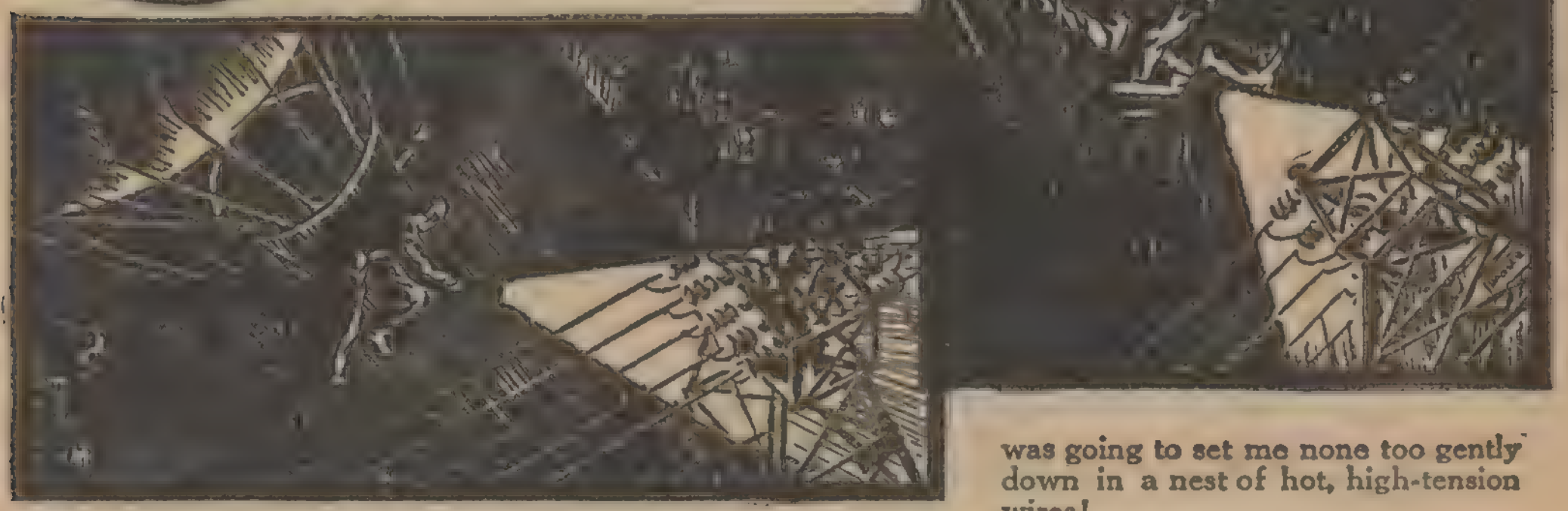
Gary laughed aloud and folded her in his arms. "Shucks, Julie, didn't we do enough o' that when we were kids? It ain't done no different nowadays!"

"No," said Julie contentedly, as his lips met hers.

Death Waited While He Hovered in the Sky!



Crowd Waits Electrocution As Falling Balloon Wafts toward Wires



was going to set me none too gently down in a nest of hot, high-tension wires!

"I never did like jumping from balloons," writes G. W. de Grange, professional daredevil of Martinsburg, West Virginia, "and this time there was a mean wind to make matters worse.

"We finally got the hot air bag filled, and I took off in the dark from the fair grounds at Emmitsburg, Md., intending to make a parachute jump into the town square.

"But the balloon was soggy. She wouldn't give me altitude. I passed about 300 feet over the treetops of the town square, and didn't dare to jump...and then the big bag began to slowly settle.

"I ripped my 'Eveready' flashlight from its straps on my 'chute harness and snapped it on to see what was below me. To my horror, the balloon was going to set me none too gently down in a nest of hot, high-tension wires!

"I've sideslipped by these death-dealing wires with a 'chute many a time... but just imagine steering a lollopy big dying balloon by pulling on the shrouds. But I pulled with everything I had while the crowd waited for an aerial execution...! and because those faithful, fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries were on the job, and showed me the wires in time, I slid by certain death by *inches!* Without light *the instant I needed it*, that crowd would have got more than its money's worth. (*Signed*)

George W. de Grange

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The GIRL FROM LAUGHING SPRINGS

She raised the gun and brought the barrel down across his head with all her strength

Sally Benton Turns From Duty's Rigid Trail When Death Threatens the Man She Loves

By INEZ L. DARBY

Author of "Cowgirl's Luck," "Her First Ride," etc.

THE sun was coursing down behind the lower edge of the western foothills in a glory of greyish purple and rose-gold that made Sally Benton forget she had to return to Junction in another three hours to entertain the none too particular customers of Red Hayes' Cold Deck Saloon.

For a moment she sat enthralled in the glory of the shadowed hills, then she slipped from her roan, ground-tied him and stood listening to the slight rustling of the leaves and the musical murmuring of water rippling over pebbles—water from four small springs that made an oasis in the desert that surrounded Junction.

These springs—Laughing Springs the people of Junction called them—

were Sally's one escape from that hot and dusty town that had sprung up overnight more than fifty years before, when a man had found gold there. It had been but a flash in the pan, that gold find, but enough of the horde that settled Junction still remained to give it the name of "town."

As Sally stepped into the shade that branched over the bubbling, mocking water, she slapped the dust from her blouse and breeches. Threads of the setting sun filtered through the lacy foliage flecking her hair with gold. The cool and the peace of the surroundings relaxed the tired lines around her anxious young face.

TO Sally this was peace; the only peace she had known for months. She had come here from the ugliness of Junction, today, to think over the letter she had received from her father that morning. She drew it from the inside of her shirt and sank down on the ground. For the second time that day she read it.

"Red Hayes says he wants to marry you, Sally," he had written. "He's a pretty powerful man around here and he's not so bad. Besides that, he'll take care of all my debts."

With an unconscious shudder Sally thrust the letter deep into the pocket of her breeches. The very thought of marrying Red Hayes made her feel ill.

So far, Sally had never been in love. The only men she had known were the waddies who had worked on her father's once prosperous spread. Now, she had been thrust into the rough unwelcome company of cowmen, ranchers, and floaters who patronized Red Hayes' saloon and gambling house, the Cold Deck.

Sally resented her father's attempt to take away from her the one thing that made her life bearable these days—the dream that somewhere there was love and a man who would some day come to take her away from the sordidness in which she now lived. To marry Red Hayes was to sacrifice that dream and all it meant.

Desperately Sally wondered if she were a foolish dreamer, wondered if she was reaching for the moon.

Deep among the quiet evening shadows she let her thoughts drift to Slim White of the Circle-W. Slim wanted to marry her. But he didn't seem any nearer to her secret heart than the man who threatened her happiness. Slim was handsome, reckless and considerate of her every wish, but she knew she wasn't in love with him. The once or twice that she had let him kiss her, there was always something left out of those moments that could have meant so much.

With a sigh Sally lay back in the lush sweet grass around the pool. For one heavenly moment there was nothing in the whole wide world but the gentle rustle of the myriad leaves and the chiding music of the Laughing Springs.

Lulled into a momentary calm, she lay immobile. A sudden rustle jerked her eyes open. She looked up abruptly into a face that peered down at her. The man brushed the bush apart and stepped toward her.

"God, but yuh're pretty!" Red Hayes said hoarsely.

"Go away!" Sally cried, her voice filled with fear.

The big gambler deliberately reached down and picked her up in his arms.

"I'll put yuh down in payment for a kiss," he said.

Sally was trembling with anger now; she was frightened, too, for she knew that Red Hayes could be mean and ruthless when he was drunk and he had been drinking since early morning. He drew her closer to him and panic gripped her.

"Please, Red," she begged. "Put me down and go away!"

Her cry was cut into by another voice.

"Drop the lady and back up with yore hands high!" The voice was quiet but it rang with a menacing authority. Sally's eyes flew to the spot from whence it had come and saw a tall, lanky figure crossing the dusty clearing. She could see the glint of steel in his hand as he moved in the shadows.

Red Hayes' hands relaxed their hold on the girl and her feet touched the ground. Jaw thrust forward, the gambler turned to meet the stranger. His voice was a snarl when he spoke.

"So, it's you! I ain't crazy about you cutting in on my business, Jerym Scott—"

"This happens to be my land," the quiet voice broke in. "Now"—and all the softness suddenly left and in its place was left a stern ugliness—"yuh'll be gettin' and stayin' off it!"

Red Hayes, owner of the Cold Deck and boss of Junction, did not move a step.

"I'm waitin' till the lady is ready," he drawled insolently. "I'm takin' her along with me."

"No! Please go!" Sally's cry slipped from her lips before she was aware of it.

The big cowman moved closer, his gun still on the bulk of Red Hayes.

"I don't think that the lady wants to be goin' with yuh." The words were spaced with venomous hate. He moved still closer and with a swift, lightning-like movement his left arm shot out and a fist landed on the sneering, handsome face of the owner of the Cold Deck.

Without a sound the gambler sank to the ground, his knees crumpling under him like coiled rope.

Jerym Scott stooped over the huddled figure and took the gambler's gun from his hip. He looked it over, then tossed it into the brush. Then he turned to Sally Benton, and said quietly:

"I'd be hurryin' home, before he wakes up, ma'am, if I was you."

For a moment Sally stood looking down at the unconscious figure of Red Hayes. Then she decided to take Jerym Scott's advice.

"Thank—thank you for what you did," she said softly and hurried to her horse.

As she rode toward Junction, Sally's thoughts were of the big waddie who had rescued her from Red. There was something about him that made her want to trust him. Vaguely, she wondered how he came to be at the Springs and who he was. Jerym Scott? She didn't ever remember hearing a name like that in these parts.

THE dusk closed down before Sally reached Junction and the lights of the little town sprang out to meet her. The bright lights of the Cold Deck brought back the fact that she would have to face Red Hayes again before long. The thought jolted all the tingling sweet thoughts that had raced through her mind as she had hurried through the desert night.

"You're a fool, Sally Benton," she said to herself, a sob rising in her throat. "He thinks you've got a home to go to; instead, you're going to the Cold Deck."

Sally slipped into her little dressing room behind Red Hayes' office. She scarcely looked at the little mirror as she slipped into the blue satin dress which she wore when she played and sang to the range men and miners who crowded the Cold Deck each night.

The roundup was over and waddies from nearby spreads were crowding the big room when she took her place at the piano. The roulette tables were already bulging with patrons and liquor was flowing freely. A blue haze had settled over every-

thing and the drawl of many rough-hewn voices competed with the tinny piano.

The batwing doors flapped ceaselessly as booted, sombreroed cowmen came or made their exits. Sally watched the doorway constantly. She was waiting—waiting for a moment when a red-haired, broad-shouldered man would push his way in. She knew that a scene was sure to follow, with her discharge from the Cold Deck a certainty.

She knew that the only reason she had been given this job was because Red Hayes wanted her. The money that her father owed was a minor item, but if she knew the gambler, his pride would not let the incident at Laughing Springs slip away without something disagreeable resulting from it.

But it was imperative that she stay on at the Cold Deck until she finished paying off her father's debt. Red Hayes held Jim Benton's I.O.U.s for several thousand dollars —enough in fact, to make it possible for him to take over her father's spread.

Sally's fingers rippled lightly down the treble keys of the piano, then she broke into a popular song of the range. But while thick-based tumblers beat time to the melody and unruly voices blared the words, her thoughts wandered back to the incident of Laughing Springs.

SHE wondered who Jerym Scott was. She wondered if he were the new owner of the J-Bar-S who had arrived a few days before. Only a handful of people had seen him and she had heard no one speak of him. She wondered if she would ever see him again and in the same instant, she hoped she wouldn't, because she would hate for him to know that she was an entertainer in a gambling saloon.

The batwing doors flew apart, putting an end to Sally's day dreaming as Red Hayes' insolent figure swaggered through the door. There was a half-scowl on his face and his eyes pierced into Sally's from across the room.

Fearfully, Sally dropped her eyes —and therefore failed to see the man who came in immediately after the gambler. When she raised them again an electric shock coursed through her. Tall, lean Jerym Scott was walking deliberately across the smoky room, toward her, an intent look in his eyes.

She glanced at him just in time to see his face harden at sight of her. He had recognized her, she knew. She could see reflected in his face what he must be thinking—an entertainer in Red Hayes' Cold Deck, the widest open saloon this side of the Border, was labelled in just one way generally.

Slim White leaned over the piano at that moment and grinned down at her. "How about singin' that song about the lonesome cowpoke?" he drawled.

Sally smiled up at him and tried to swallow the tight, nervous feeling that seemed to grip her throat. She glanced over to the corner where Red Hayes and Jerym Scott were sitting down at a table. She wondered what Jerym Scott could be doing there—what his business with Red Hayes might be.

She sang for Slim White. She sang the same song three times and most of the waddies around the bar joined the group at the piano before she finished. Slim White leaned over when she stopped singing the chorus for the third time.

"Can I see you home, Sally?" he asked softly.

She glanced up to answer and she saw Jerym Scott standing behind Slim staring down at her. There was a curious, intent, questioning look in his blue eyes; a look that made

the warm blood rush to Sally's face again.

She tried to keep the confusion out of her voice as she turned to Slim White and thanked him.

"Not tonight, Slim. Thank you for asking me. But, I haven't forgotten about the barn dance next week."

The bartender elbowed his way through the crowd of young cowmen.

"Hey, Sally," he said, "the boss wants to see yuh in his office." Sally made no move. "Right away," he added.

Sally rose from the piano, and avoiding Jerym Scott's eyes, followed the shuffling barkeep through the crowd of laughing, drunken men.

RED HAYES was sprawled in a swivel chair behind a littered, scarred, rolled-top desk, which had seen better days. Besides the straight back chair, there was no other furniture in the drab, uncomfortable room.

"I want yuh to be nice to Jerym Scott," Red Hayes began abruptly. Sally could see that he was still angry, although he was trying to control his temper. "I want yuh to keep him comin' here until I tell yuh different." Then, as he saw the angry light come into Sally's eyes and her red lips tighten in her soft oval face, his voice became pleading, ingratiating.

"I want Scott to forget about what happened at the Springs this afternoon. I want him for a friend instead of an enemy. Yuh can help me and I won't forget yuh if yuh do." Red Hayes hesitated and his voice changed to a soft whine as he went on. "I want yuh for a friend too, Sally. Yuh know how I feel about yuh. I'm sorry I lost my head this afternoon."

"You followed me," Sally accused him coldly.

"I swear I didn't, Sally," he protested. "I'd been over on the hill, beyond the Springs and I was on my way back to Junction when I saw yore horse."

Sally was too worried and too annoyed to wonder then what Red Hayes was doing in the vicinity of the Springs. Neither did she wonder about the reason for his making up to Jerym Scott, at the moment.

"Well, will yuh help me, Sally?" he asked.

"My job here is to play and sing." Sally's voice was dry and tense. "If Jerym Scott wants to come to hear me I'll—"

Sally saw the ugly light flare into the gambler's eyes. For a second it flickered there, but when he spoke his voice was as soft as silk.

"It's a business deal, Sally," he said. "I want to talk business with Scott, and I know he won't deal with a man he don't like—"

"What kind of business?" Sally asked suspiciously.

"I want to buy a strip of land from Scott," he drawled. "He don't like this country, and I'd like to buy some of his range. But I'm not so sure he would want to talk business with me, now. He's sorta got the wrong idea of me since this afternoon. Sally, if yuh'll help me I'll make it worth yore while," he said in a pleading voice.

"What do you mean?" Sally was still doubtful about Red's simple explanation, but there was no reason why he shouldn't buy a piece of land.

"I mean that if yuh help me to put over this deal, I'll call yore dad's debt to me square."

For a moment the real meaning of Red Hayes' words did not sink into Sally's hate-filled mind. Then suddenly she realized what it meant—what it would mean. She could leave the Cold Deck and go home! Tears stood in her eyes and words came haltingly to her lips.

"You mean—you mean that you'll

give me the I.O.U.s and our spread will be free?"

Hayes nodded. "We'll call it quits, yore pa and me. And," he added craftily, "yuh won't have to work at the Cold Deck any longer."

Sally could only stare at him. She could see no hitch in his offer. There didn't seem to be any reason why she shouldn't do it.

Red Hayes got up and stood beside her. "Yuh hate me plenty, don't yuh, Sally?" he said.

She tried to keep her eyes from his, for she was afraid that he would see hate and fear in their brown depths.

"I don't hate you, Red," she said. "It's just that my Father needs me and I need my home. I'll do what I can," she told him as she moved toward the door. Before he could reply she was on her way back to the big smoky barroom.

JERYM SCOTT was leaning on the far end of the bar, his gaze on the door of Red Hayes' office when Sally stepped into the room. She felt his piercing blue eyes watching her as she wove her way across the crowded room and sat in front of the piano.

Her fingers trailed across the keyboard. Jerym Scott's voice cut through the rumbling chords of "Susannah."

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," he said in a deep, soft voice. "I came into town to find you." His voice halted, then he continued, "I'm goin' to be truthful: I didn't expect to find you here."

Sally looked up to meet the puzzled look in the depths of his keen blue eyes. Her gaze traveled to the deep, soft, black hair that fell about the earnest, tanned face.

"I'm glad—glad you found me," Sally stammered and lowered her eyes. "I wanted to thank you for what you did this afternoon." Her promise flashed into her mind and she added, "It was just Red's way of teasing me. He didn't mean any harm."

The big waddy looked puzzled and Sally's eyes dropped away from the baffled look.

"Yuh don't have to be apologizin' for Red Hayes, ma'am," he told her. "I know him—and the likes of him." He paused for a minute. "I didn't follow yuh this evening when yuh lit out from the pool, for I was thinkin' that yuh wanted to be all alone."

Sally's brown eyes looked into the blue depths of his. "You were very good to me," she told him simply.

He blushed then, beneath his tan. "I didn't have a chance to tell yuh my name; it's Jerym Scott. I own the J-Bar-S. I just moved up from Texas. Came to take over the spread when my uncle, Jeremiah Sulky, died."

Sally knew who Jeremiah Sulky was. He had been a friend of her father's years ago. Now she understood why she had not met Jerym before.

"I'm Sally Benton," she told him.

"I like that name," he said smiling down at her. "Fits you somehow. Yuh know, tonight is the first time in my life that I didn't sort of hate my name."

A puzzled look flashed across Sally's face as her fingers rippled the piano keys softly.

"You see, Jeremiah Sulky wasn't a real uncle of mine. He loved my Mother and when my Father married her, she named her second son for him—Jeremiah Scott is really the name. I hated it until one day, when I was still a little boy, she told me that in Connaught, where she came from, they called lads of my name, Jerym. I've been that ever since, but I've always had it in for old Sulky.

"But today was the first time that I was glad that I came to Arizona.

Since sundown I've been kinda thanking old Sulky for leaving me his J-Bar-S."

Through the hazy smoke her eyes met his and in the space of a few seconds Sally Benton's world became a lovely, exciting place. The Cold Deck was, at that moment, a spot of enchantment. She was conscious of nothing in the world but a pair of very blue eyes, a lean, tan face and a soft drawling voice that sent thrills of exquisite happiness through her.

"I wonder if yuh'd let me escort yuh home when yuh leave here tonight, Miss Sally?" Jerym Scott asked.

For answer, Sally nodded her golden head. Red Hayes and his promise were miles from her thoughts, in that instant.

WITH trembling fingers Sally Benton changed from the blue gown to her soft riding breeches and white linen shirt. She took a quick look at her flushed, excited face in the tiny mirror and wished that just for tonight she might be pretty. She hurried out of the dressing room and her boot-heels made a loud tattoo on the boards of the now empty barroom. She slipped through the batwings and out onto the moonlit porch.

Jerym Scott was waiting there. He stepped out of the shadows, caught her elbow firmly in one of his lean hands. He towered over her as they walked along the rough boardwalk that led to the scattered, sleeping houses that formed the town of Junction.

They were silent until they got out of earshot of the Cold Deck. The moon bathed the tiny gown in the magic of its silver whiteness. The cool freshness of the night wind came off the desert and wrapped itself around them. It did strange things to Sally as they walked along in the silent, silver void. It was Jerym who spoke first, breaking the silence.

"I can't figger it out," he said abruptly. "It's been worryin' me all night and I hope that yuh won't mind me talkin' about it, ma'am."

Sally laughed a little. She didn't know what he meant, but she loved to hear the tall cowman talk, with the strange little phrases of his Irish Connaught mother breaking through the western drawl. Her arm in his, she was giddy with delight and wholly unprepared for what the tall Texan was about to say.

"It don't make sense, yuh bein' at the Cold Deck," he went on. "Yuh're not the kind of a girl that's in a place like that."

The smile went out of Sally's eyes. The silvery whiteness of the night was cold suddenly. She wished there were people around. She didn't want to answer. She couldn't tell him that it was her father who had caused her to take the job at the saloon. It was a shame she didn't want Jerym Scott to know about.

"I need the job," she said simply. "Red Hayes knows my Father and—and he offered to let me work for him." That was as near the truth as she could get.

They were off the boardwalk now, making their way along the dejected border of scrubby trees that Molly Braden had nursed for years to shade her house from the merciless sun that beat down on Junction. The moonlight flashed in patches through the leaves overhead and made dappled shadows on them. Sally knew that Jerym was looking sidewise at her and she was glad of the semi-darkness.

"If it's just a matter of a job, Miss Sally," he said eagerly, "I would be mighty glad if I could be helpin' yuh. Yuh see, my sister is comin' to spend the summer here. There is only old Maggie on the

range—no other woman. Yuh'd be an awful help if yuh came up and stayed with Sue while she was here. I'm sure that yuh'd like it better than—"

"Oh, I couldn't!" Sally broke in. He was rushing on so eagerly that she had to stop him. "It's kind of you to offer, but, I— Well, I've promised Red—" her voice trailed off weakly.

The heart of Sally Benton had leaped at the thought of going back to the wide, cool cleanness of the range. She had allowed herself the luxury of a moment's imagining, as she was swept with a deep longing for the things that she had loved since she could remember. And there was Jerym, too— But she would not let herself go any farther.

They stopped in front of the gate that opened into the garden that bloomed at the edges of Molly's white house. Jerym towered above her in the moonlight.

"Sally," he said suddenly, urgently, "what is it? There's something." He paused for a moment, then he said slowly, half-heartedly, "Yuh can't be in love with Red Hayes?"

"No! No!" she cried out in protest, but her voice hardly more than a whisper. "It isn't that." She raised her hand in hopeless protest and her fingers brushed against his lean muscular arm.

The touch of her hand seemed to electrify him. For the briefest second they stared at one another, his blue eyes engulfing hers.

Then his hands flashed up to her shoulders and he drew her to him. The night wind brought in the small sounds of the desert night and mingled them with the loud beating of Sally's heart.

Jerym's lips sought and found hers. They were clean, firm against her mouth. The world raced madly around her for a long moment and hung trembling. It might have been ages before the bliss of it ended. He didn't let her go, however, but held her cradled in his arms, his clean-cut face held close against hers.

"I love you, Sally," he said huskily. "I knew it from the minute I saw yuh. —I would have been lookin' for yuh till I found yuh, and now I won't be letting yuh go. I want yuh to marry me, Sally; I can't let yuh go back to Hayes."

SALLY drew away from him, her face suddenly white and strained in the tree gloom. "Jerym, I've got to go back," she said. "I can't leave—not yet."

The young Texan would not release her shoulder but held her out in front of him and stared into her face trying to read what was behind the fear he had heard in her voice.

"Tell me what it is, Sally," he demanded. "What is it that keeps you there?"

Jerym Scott's voice was vibrant, urgent, insistent. His fingers dug deep into the girl's slim shoulders. In that moment, Sally, overwrought by the emotions that were running riot in her mind, blurted out the truth.

"It's a piece of land Red wants to buy from you," she burst out. "If you'll sell it to him, I'll be—I'll be—"

The tall Texan turned her loose so abruptly that she staggered back several paces before she regained her balance. Surprise cut off her next words. She stared at him, stunned by the sudden change in his face and voice.

"So that's it," he ground out. "That's what you want of me! That's why you did this!"

He looked, for a moment, as if he would strike her. Then he drew his hand across his mouth as if to free his lips of hers.

"All right, if that's what you want, you'll have it!" He gritted the words

at her and strode into the night, leaving her standing bewildered, in the moonlight.

IT was late the next afternoon, before Sally found Red Hayes. She had spent most of the night trying to puzzle out the mess she had somehow made of things.

She was sure now that Red Hayes had not told her the truth about the land that he wanted to buy from Jerym. There was something more behind it than just a straight land deal.

She found the gambler in his office just at sundown. One look at him told her that he was very drunk. He lolled back in his ramshackle chair, his dusty, booted feet high on the battered desk in front of him.

"Come on in," he roared as his boot-heels hit the floor. "I've been waitin' for yuh." He leaned over and took some papers off the desk. "Yuh did a good job and Red Hayes keeps his word." He staggered across the dusty room and thrust the many small slips of papers into her hand.

Her eyes dropped to the crumpled sheets. Vaguely, through anger-hazed eyes, she recognized her father's signature on one of them. The I.O.U.s! Red Hayes was giving her her freedom. That could mean but one thing —Jerym Scott had sold him the land he wanted.

Suddenly Sally became cautious. She tried to keep her voice steady to hide her feelings until she had found out what she needed to know.

"So he sold it to you," she said slowly.

He beamed down at her through bleary, drink-sodden eyes. His rough hands caught her about the shoulders, where Jerym's lean fingers had clasped her last night. She clenched her teeth and fought back the revulsion she felt. But she did not move.

"Yes," his face swung close to hers, "he told me that it was for you. That you did a smart piece of work."

"What's it for, Red?" she asked softly. "What did you want that land for?" She lifted her face slowly and a smile touched the corners of her mouth.

Red Hayes' face became crafty as he studied her eyes. Sally's forced smile remained on her lips.

"We're partners, aren't we, Red?" she coaxed. "After all, I think I've got a right to know what it's all about."

His eyes were avid as he picked up a long, legal-looking sheet and handed it to her.

"That strip of land is worth a thousand times the money I paid for it," he gloated. "A million, maybe. It's the old lost strike of Laughing Springs, Sally! That old prospector was no fool, only they didn't get his directions straight. We'll be rich, girl. I'll buy yuh anything that yuh want!"

"You mean that Jerym Scott didn't know about the deposits on his land?" Sally's voice was still soft and she kept the fixed smile about her lips. She leaned back against the desk, bracing herself with one hand. She was playing for time now, trying to think of a way out. She had to do something; she couldn't let Jerym Scott believe that she had known of Red Hayes' crookedness.

Without warning, the gambler reached out and grabbed her roughly to him. It was then that she knew what to do.

She had the deed gripped tightly in one hand. His roughness in pulling her into his arms had thrown her off balance. And, in an effort to steady herself, her hand slipped down and rested against the butt of his gun which was holstered on his thigh.

Like a flash, she gripped it and pulled it out. Before his liquor-

clouded mind could grasp what was happening, Sally was digging the muzzle of the six-gun into his stomach.

"I'll shoot, Red," she snapped. "I'm going out of here and I'm taking Jerym Scott's deed with me. You lied to me, Red, or I would never—"

He almost took her by surprise. If he hadn't tripped clumsily, he might have spoiled everything. Sally stepped quickly to one side as he made a grab for the gun. She raised it and brought the heavy steel barrel down across his head with all her strength. Red Hayes sank to the floor without a sound.

For a moment Sally stood looking at him as the deep, red gash filled and blood poured down over his eyes. For a minute she wondered if she had killed him, then, struck with the horror of what she had done, she rushed through the office door and into the saloon.

She found Slim White just swinging through the batwings. He greeted her with a loud "howdy," but his reckless face sobered when he saw the tense whiteness of hers.

"Slim!" she blurted out. "Slim, I need your help!"

HE followed her through the batwings and into the fast-gathering night. "Now," he said as they walked hurriedly along the deserted street, "what is it yuh want me to do? Yuh know I'll do anything yuh ask."

"Thanks, Slim," she said quietly. Then she told him very briefly what had happened. "I want you to take this deed to Jerym Scott, Slim," she finished. "I want you to tell him to send Red Hayes' money back to him right away. Bring it if you can, and Red won't have any proof that there was ever such a deal."

She took the deed from her pocket and tore it in half, then in quarters and handed the pieces to the bewildered waddy.

"But, why—what's the idea of tearing this up?" he asked, holding the pieces before him confusedly.

"Jerym Scott might insist on letting the deal go through because he is angry and hurt. Just tell him that Red Hayes won't ever bother him again."

"Why don't you tell him, Sally?" Slim said looking down at her pityingly. "I'll ride out to his place. But, why don't yuh tell him yoreself. Yuh love him, don't yuh?"

Sally looked up into the honest eyes that stared down at her.

"Yes, I do love him, Slim," she said. "But I can't go. He hates me. All I want now is to see that he gets back his land."

After Slim had ridden away, Sally went to her room at Molly's and hurriedly packed her things in a bag. In the light of the moon she saddled her pony and rode out of the quiet town.

As she traveled through the night a great peace descended on her, soothing a little the pain in her heart. She had lost the one thing in the world that would have given her happiness, but she had righted the wrong for which she was responsible.

She had the I.O.U.s that Red Hayes had given her. She felt that she had a right to them. After what he had done to her, she figured they were even. She would go back to her father, get him to sell the spread and they would go away together. She didn't care where, just so long as it was away from where she might run into Jerym Scott.

Bright streamers of dawn were pushing their way across the sky when she arrived home. Her father was not around; the Chinese cook told her he had been rounding up strays for the past two days and was camping out on the spread.

Sally was just finishing her coffee, when the sound of pounding hoofs came to her. She got up and went

out on the front porch expecting to see her father. But the dishevelled, dusty man who fell from the saddle and stumbled across from the hitching-rail, was not her father. It was Slim White.

Sally knew that something had happened before he spoke. She stood tense and white, waiting to hear the news.

Slim sank down on the edge of the porch, breathing hard. He wiped the sweat from his face and the inside band of his Stetson with a red bandanna.

"They got Jerym Scott, Sally," he jerked out finally. "I didn't get to see him—to give him yore message. They'd already taken him into town."

"Got him! Who's got him?" she cried shrilly.

"The sheriff," Slim told her grimly. "Red Hayes swore out a warrant for Scott's arrest, accusing him of beating him up and stealin' some money from him. He gave the sheriff the amount of money, the kind of bills, and how many of each. The sheriff found the money just like Hayes said he would, on Scott. Scott's waddies told me that Jerym admitted he got the money from Hayes, and that he was in Hayes' office today. He denies that he beat Red up or stole the money, but he won't explain no further. The sheriff says it looks like Red has got a case.

"Scott's bein' from down Texas way makes him a stranger round here, sorta. Red's got feelin' runnin' high against him in town. No tellin' what will happen—"

"HAVE you got that deed I gave you, Slim?" Sally broke in suddenly. Her eyes were flashing fire, and her face looked marble white.

Slim took the torn pieces of the deed from his pocket, handed them to her.

"What you aimin' to do, Sally?" he asked. "Yuh shore ain't goin' into town and try to—"

"I am," she said grimly. "I'm going in and tell the sheriff the truth. There's no one else to take Jerym Scott's side."

"Well," sighed the lanky waddy, "I'll go with yuh, then, Sally, 'cause yuh and Jerym might be needin' some help before this day is over."

THE main street of Junction was full of life when they arrived. The sun was beginning to bear down with brazen tongues of heat, but Sally was chilled with the fear that ran through her; the fear that they might be too late.

She and Slim rode directly to the sheriff's office. A little crowd was gathered outside, tense and expectant.

Sally went through the crowd and into the office, Slim close behind her. Red Hayes was there as she knew he would be. An angry sneer twisted his face as he saw her, but a hint of fear leaped into his eyes.

Sally ignored Red. She walked up to the sheriff's desk, took the torn pieces of the deed out of her pocket and spread them out before the grey-haired old man.

"This explains why Jerym Scott had money from Red Hayes," she said. "Red tried to rook him out of a piece of land—"

"That's a lie!" the big gambler yelled, rising to his feet and starting toward the girl with a threatening fist raised.

Slim stepped forward, fire in his blue eyes. But the sheriff stopped both of them.

"Sit down, Hayes," he said quietly. "Let Miss Sally talk."

Sally told him of the land deal, of her part in it. She told the sheriff why she was working for Hayes. When she had finished the sheriff stood up, strapped on his gun-belt. He called out for one of his deputies

to bring in Jerym Scott from the jail in the rear of his office.

The tall Texan came into the room. His face hardened at sight of the girl, but he stood in silence, avoiding her pleading eyes.

"Miss Sally claims she beat Red Hayes, not you," the old sheriff said, the slightest twinkle in his faded eyes. "She told me all about the land deal, too. She had the deed which she took from Red herself because he involved her in his little scheme to get that strip of land from you."

He explained further about Sally's reason for being in the Cold Deck, and just how she had come to ask him to sell Red Hayes the land. When the sheriff mentioned the I.O.U.s, and of Sally's fight with the gambler after she had discovered his trick, the big Texan turned toward the girl.

Oblivious to the others in the room, he crossed over to Sally, towered over her. "I'm mighty sorry," he said gently. "And I'm glad, too —glad things aren't like I thought. I thought that you were in love with Hayes. I thought that was why you were helping him, why you worked there. I couldn't find any other reason for it.

"I knew that gold deposit was there. I'd just found it out recently and had sent for an expert from the assayer's office to come out and verify it. But when I thought you wanted to trick me—well, it didn't matter then what happened. I just wanted to give you what you wanted —and go away. I figured if you'd do a thing like that, you shore loved him mightily—"

Sally's eyes were shining up into his as he talked. The sheriff had moved over to where Hayes stood, glaring at the Texan's broad back.

"I guess yuh better git from here, Red," the old man said. "It'd kinda make yuh a laughin' stock around here if it got out that little Miss Sally here beat yuh up and took that deed away from yuh. And if yuh don't want it told yuh better just subside nice and quiet and mind yore own business for a while."

His face purple with anger, the gambler started for the door. Slim White trailed him out, and put in a few threatening words of his own on the way.

The sheriff took a last look over his shoulder before he went out and closed the creaking door behind him. Jerym Scott was holding Sally close in his arms now, his voice husky with emotion, as he said:

"I'm afraid to let you out of my sight again. Do you think you could marry me today, Sally darling? Then you can start right in on that new job out at my spread with a brand new name. Please, say you will—I'd be mighty proud to have you called Mrs. Jeremiah Scott."

She didn't need words to answer that one.

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BOUNTY

"Well, why don't you arrest me—or do you hang girls, too?"

A Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I

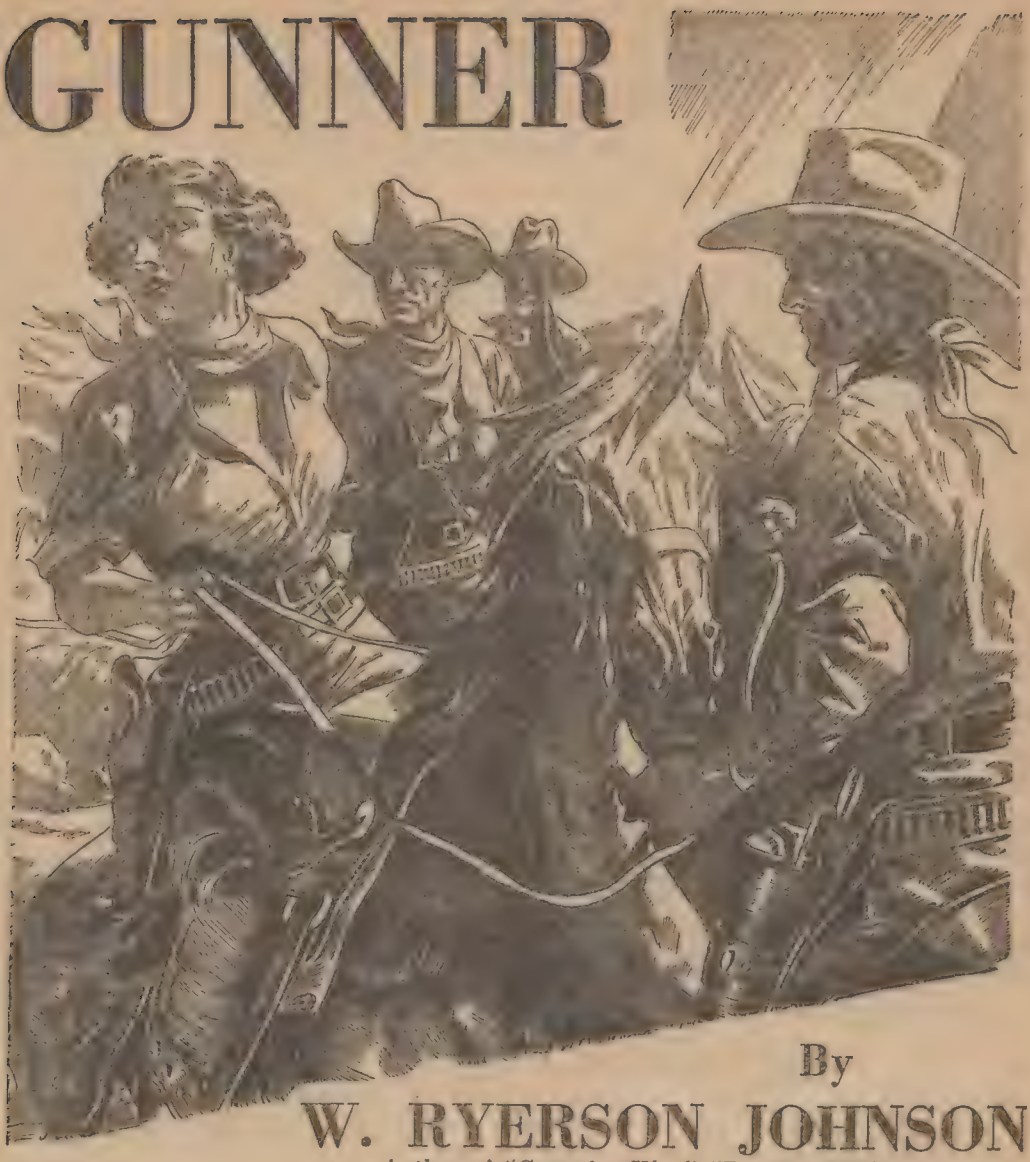
Rescue

DONNA NORLAND shook hands with "Strap" Jordon on the wide ranchhouse porch. Her eyes followed the lean swing of his shoulders as he stepped out under the star-powdered sky and walked to his horse. When he turned in saddle and waved good-by, her own hand raised in a shy flutter. Then she opened the door and went inside.

Old "Salt-grass" Norland was waiting for her. His cowhorn mustache pronged fiercely downward, and his pipe, tight in his teeth, slanted even with his eyes. He jabbed the pipe at Donna.

Donna Norland Faces Six-Gun Thunder to

GUNNER



By

W. RYERSON JOHNSON

Author of "Guns for Hire," "Drink and Die," etc.

"Who brung yuh home from the dance?"

"Why, Strap Jordon," she said.

"What I thought! How long's this been goin' on?"

She stared at her father, eyes widening. "How long's what been goin' on, Daddy?"

"You know well enough. First time yuh've been with him?"

"Yes."

"See that it's the last! That barroom maverick—did he kiss you?"

Her cheeks flamed.

"No, he didn't. But you haven't any right to ask!"

Old Salt-grass snorted. "Haven't, huh? Haven't any right to protect my own daughter from a shiftless, thievin', barroom gunnie!"

Win the Life and Love of a Roaming Waddy!

Her foot stamped the floor hard. Her blue eyes and her hair with the shimmer of gold in it, she had inherited from her mother; but she had her father's stubborn temper.

"You haven't any right to talk like that about someone you don't know, and I won't listen to you any more."

He followed her to her room, and when she slammed the door, he roared through the panels:

"Not wantin' to embarrass yuh, I never said nothin' to him this time, but if that barroom bully shows on the Hook T spread agin, I'll gun him off!"

"There's plenty of places I can see him besides here," she flared.

ONE of the places was where Jumping Fish Creek forked into Flat Branch. The spot, girded with granite boulders, and screened by catclaw and yellow willow, was on Hook T property, but a full three miles from the ranchhouse. Two days later Donna made arrangements to meet Strap Jordon there.

Not that she thought of the meeting as a tryst. She was only furious at her father. Laying down the law like that to her! She wasn't in love with Strap Jordon. She wasn't even interested in him—not very.

She couldn't help feeling a little breathless about the meeting, though. But that, she told herself, was because she was defying her father. It had nothing to do with Strap Jordon. When you came right down to it, she scarcely knew Strap.

Maybe they were right, the people who were saying things about him. He had shown in a month before, and had not applied anywhere for a riding job. Just hazed around the country, when he wasn't playing cards at the Shag-Hoof Saloon.

And he *did* have the brand of a wild one. His eyes were half squeezed down—a gunman's squint. But his eyes could soften too. At the schoolhouse dance—

There was a rustling in the willows. Donna started. She felt her face grow hot, watching to see Strap Jordon burst through the willows.

Suddenly she caught her breath. Dimly, through the fine-leafed willows, she could make out a man's crashing bulk. And it wasn't Strap! The next split wink the man was standing before her, grinning at her.

Short, stubby legs, shoulders grotesquely huge, head too small for them, this grinning brute was a far call from smiling, lean-muscled Strap Jordon.

"Deck Hefflin!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Sounds like I wasn't expected to the party," the man sneered.

From behind him, unseen until now, a slightly-built man, "Shadow" Vautt, slunk forward. Vautt's skin was stretched so tight that his pale eyes appeared flat. His nose was jutting cartilage and his lips tapered to a knife edge against good teeth. He was "Deck" Hefflin's gun shadow, as quick as a sidewinder and rated about as venomous.

Donna couldn't back away unless she stepped into the creek.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"You, for one thing," Deck Hefflin said as his huge shoulders swung his stubby body a step closer.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she flared. "You come a step closer and I'll—"

"Yuh'll what?" Hefflin was grinning again. "There's only you and me and Shadow."

"There'll be someone else in about a minute!" Donna cried desperately.

"That's the other reason why I'm here," Deck Hefflin said. "I want Strap Jordon too." He pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of his vest and unfolded it. "Take a look. That's yore writin', ain't it?"

Donna's face was white. "Where'd you get that?" she demanded.

Hefflin smirked. "Found it in Jor-

don's room when I went there lookin' for him," he said. "Missed him there. But we aim to find him here, don't we, Shadow?"

Donna sensed something hideous here, a murderous intent. Overhead the sun shown brightly. But Donna shivered.

"What—do you want of him?"

Shadow Vautt spoke up then, his words a mere whisper of sound.

"He's a no-good barroom gambler, ma'am. We aim to bring him to justice."

"If he gambles it's usually with you two," Donna said defiantly. "How are you any better—"

"Gamblin's a profession with us, ma'am," Vautt pointed out. "We win."

"In consequence," Deck Hefflin said, "we ain't tempted to gamble with somebody else's gold. And some of the gold passed over the tables by Strap Jordon has been identified as Angel Wing Mine's gold that was lost in the Bleeker stage stick-up!"

"I don't believe you!" Donna flared.

The stubby man shrugged.

"It don't no way's matter if yuh do or not. Facts speaks."

"And the reward put up by the minin' people for the riddance of unsocial elements from the community is five thousand dollars," said Vautt.

DONNA'S lip curled. "Bounty gunners!"

"Mebbe," Hefflin said. "But we're also here to pertect Western womanhood— Ain't we, Shadow?"

"Shore. With renegades like Jordon cruisin' the bush no woman's safe." He grinned. "I'll ease on up the slope and cover our backtrail—leave yuh to yore pertectin', Deck."

The instant Hefflin was alone with Donna, his pudgy hand grasped her arm.

Sound choked in her throat, but she struggled frantically. Deck slapped her across the face and shook her.

"For a card-cheatin' thief yuh wait here willin'," he snarled, "but for me yuh put up a fight!"

Fighting, sobbing, once she succeeded in raking her fingernails deep across Hefflin's cheek. But Hefflin, cursing, wrenched her close, and with his whiskery bloody cheek against hers gave her something really to fight about.

Then the shot sounded. One savage bark from up-slope where Shadow Vautt had gone. For a moment the gun echoes gave Donna hope. Strap Jordon had come and taken care of Shadow!

Deck Hefflin laughed hoarsely, and rasped: "That's Shadow's thirty-eight a-poppin'. That there was a five-thousand dollar shot yuh jest heard!"

Strap Jordon shot! And she, too, would be dead before this was through! As she struggled, she felt Hefflin chopping flat-hand blows against the side of her head. They jarred her to the small stirrup-scuffed heels of her riding boots.

Suddenly her knees buckled. Hefflin scooped her to him. She felt his hands tighten, and then the next moment he was dropping her. The jolt of that drop helped focus her wavering consciousness.

She saw why Hefflin had dropped her. A man, easing close from out of the willows, had jabbed a six-gun in the stubby man's back.

And the man was Strap Jordon!

Donna had first been attracted to Strap because of his smile of whimsical good nature. Now it looked as though his face could never smile. His lips were tight and his jaw muscles hard-bunched. His lidded eyes had the hard glint of quartz.

He took Hefflin's guns, ordered him to square around. When Hefflin saw the weapon Strap held, his little eyes bulged with fear.

"Shadow's gun!" he blurted. "Yuh

killed Shadow—with his own gun!"

"I didn't kill him," Strap said grimly. "Not quite. He laid one shot through my hair. Then I laid my fist on his ear. He's sleepin' it off back there." His lean hand tightened on the .38. "How'd *you* like to take a sleep? A long one."

Panic glazed Hefflin's litle boring eyes.

"Don't kill me!" he blubbered. "Don't kill—"

"No!" Donna cried breathless protest. "Don't kill him!"

He didn't answer, merely looked at Hefflin bleakly.

"Bounty gunnin', was yuh?" he said tightly. "Ridin' ahead of the posse, thinkin' to collect off me and the girl both. How much would yuh give for yore chances, Deck?"

"Talk to him, Miss Norland!" the man whined. "I didn't mean no harm to yuh, and I was only doin' my duty tryin' to catch him. He robbed the Bleeker stage—"

"Did you?" Donna asked Strap point-blank.

"Hefflin says so. He'd oughta know. Now I'm gonna tell *him* somethin'— Wherever yuh think that the stage gold is—yuh're wrong. I'm not gonna kill yuh. Not this time. And after yuh've took a look where yuh think the gold is, then come and find me; mebbe we kin work out somethin' that'll be worth more to yuh than my five-thousand dollar hide. Now git! Pick up yore sidewinder partner and ride!"

After Hefflin had gone, butting madly through the willows, Donna looked uncertainly at Strap.

"Is it true?" she asked awedly. "Are you the one who's been robbing the stages?

Only the lips on his hard face moved. "That's what they're sayin'. What do you think?"

"I—I don't know what to think. I've never believed any of the things folks said about you, but—"

"Believe this, Donna"—a smile broke through the bleakness on his face—"that yuh're lovely! Yuh're the only fresh and lovely thing I've seen for so long—"

In the same smooth incisive way that might have characterized his gun action, his arm swept suddenly around her. He drew her close.

CHAPTER II

A Surprising Confession

IN that first bewildering instant, with his body firm against her, and his mouth hard on her mouth, Donna couldn't think. His kiss was an incalculable force, drawing a response from her own lips. It was burning delight which spread in a weakening wave over her whole body.

Only for an instant. Then realization jolted her. Why this man, this Strap Jordon, who was more of a stranger to her than Deck Hefflin, was acting exactly as Hefflin had tried to act! He had just grabbed her and was kissing her. Worse, she was kissing him back!

She had gouged at Hefflin with her fingernails, would have killed him if she could. But under the same circumstances she was yielding her lips to Strap! To a man who had practically admitted to hold-ups!

The next moment she was wrenching away from him, her small brown hands, moulded firmly into fists, beating at his shoulders.

"Let me go!" she cried. "Let me go!"

When he dropped his arms suddenly and stood back, she was so out of balance that she fell. She looked up at him, more furious than she had ever been in her life.

"Oh!" she sobbed furiously. "Why are men such brutes? You're all alike—all of you! And I believe you did hold up the Bleeker stage—"

She paused, some of the stormy passion abruptly going out of her eyes. She laughed. "Oh—I didn't mean that! Forgive me." She reached out her hands. "Pull me up."

His whole face brightened, and with all the hardness gone he was amazingly good to look at. He reached out his hands. She took them. He pulled her lightly to her feet.

She let the pull sway her against him. But before he could take her in his arms again, she had swerved backward—and in her hand was the six-shooter she had snatched from his holster!

She faced him, the big six-shooter held unwaveringly.

"Stay back!" she warned.

THERE was cold menace in her voice. But he started toward her anyway. The big gun blared. The bullet smashed the rowel off one of Jordon's spurs. He stopped in his tracks. The gun blazed again. The lead plowed between his feet and deroweled the other spur.

"Just to show you the first shot wasn't an accident," she blazed. "Now back up!"

His eyes were slitted again and hard as quartz. But he stepped back.

Bending quickly, she picked up Shadow Vautt's .38 and switched it to her gun hand.

"More my size," she commented. "From close up it'll stop you quick as any."

"Why don't you tell me the rules?" Jordon's voice was brittle. "Looks like I'm playin' yore way. But I oughta know."

"The rules are simple enough," she flared. "You just turn around and start walking along the creek. Keep walking till I tell you to stop. Get going!"

Once, as he moved ahead, he looked back and asked: "Yuh mind detailin' them rules some, Donna?"

"You robbed the Bleeker stage, didn't you?"

"Would yuh believe me if I said I didn't?"

"No, I wouldn't!"

"Well, then?" He shrugged.

"The man who robbed the Bleeker stage was a desperado!" she declared. "In the last stick-up the driver was killed. I'd known old 'Whip' Sallee ever since I was a baby. Used to sit in his lap and hold the reins. It was a cold killing! Old Whip never threw down." Her voice sharpened. "But I'll throw down if you make any fast moves!"

"So you're a bounty gunner along with the rest?"

The bitterness in his voice slowed her for a moment. Then:

"I am not!" she cried hotly. "I wouldn't touch a cent of that reward money! But my Father was right about you from the first. So was everyone else. And I'm going to turn you over to the sheriff. It—it's my duty."

"Yeah," he said dryly, "that's what Deck Hefflin and Shadow called it."

"You're hateful—twisting words to fit them to me!"

That got a rise out of him. "Yuh think I'm hateful—twistin' words. Yuh're twistin' lives! Yuh got any idea what yuh're doin'? There's a posse makin' up in Wolf Jaw now, to look for me. Mebbe they've already started. If they find me they'll kill me. Is that what you want?"

"You're just trying to talk me out of this!" Donna cried. "Because I'm a girl you think I'm soft! Well, it won't work."

They came out of the willows into a weed-grown clearing. Smoke-scarred rocks from a tumbling house foundation lay among the weeds.

"This was the little house where my Father and Mother lived when they first came West," she said tensely. "It burned down years ago. But the food-storage cellar that was

dug into the ground apart from the house is as good as ever. It'll hold you or ten men like you."

In front of the cellar where rock steps led down, she stopped.

"Inside you go," she ordered.

He appeared to be measuring distance for a spring at her. Her face whitened, but her gun hand remained firm.

All at once the tension left him. "Yuh would shoot, wouldn't yuh? I wouldn't like that. I—yuh see, ever since the night I met yuh at the schoolhouse dance, I've been in love with yuh. It was why I risked my life comin' out here to see yuh when I knew a posse was buildin' up to stretch my neck. Kind of a joke on me, wasn't it? Did yuh have this all planned when yuh sent me the note to meet yuh?"

"Stop it!" Her breath came faster, her lips trembled, but that gun hand of hers remained firm as rock. "You can't get around me like that! You just want to throw me off guard so you can grab my gun. The way you grabbed me a while ago. You and Deck Hefflin both. You talk about love! You don't know what it is! Get down those steps before I push you with a bullet!"

He shrugged his lean shoulders, went down the dark cellar. She slammed the heavy oak door and dropped the ready bar into place. She relaxed then, sagging against the door, so weak from nervous exhaustion that she could hardly stand. A cactus wren from its perch on a thorny *ocotillo* scolded her raucously. An inquisitive bee hummed close. The sky was still blue with lambs-wool clouds scattered through it, and the sun shone down.

But the smoke-scarred rocks from the old house poked through the weeds like monstrous teeth. Warm in the sun, she shivered. She couldn't explain it, but the place reeked of menace and hidden death. Still clutching Shadow Vautt's .38, she started away. She was almost running by the time she reached the creek.

She caught up her horse from where she had ground-hitched it. Heeling hard, she crashed away through thorny underbrush.

The shortest way to Wolf Jaw led over a sizable mileage or malpai rock. Thrown up in an ancient volcanic eruption, the black rock had cooled in rough sheets, and lay now as it had for centuries, wind-swept, trackless, glinting sullenly under the sun.

Donna set her course by the distant pinnacles of the Organ Mountains, crossed the stretch of trackless lava and hit the trail to Wolf Jaw.

SHE hadn't reached town when she met the posse riding. She waved frantically and swerved her palomino into their midst. Sheriff Clem Clay recognized her and reined close. The sheriff, veteran frontier lawman, had been a friend of her family for years. He was a little man, and his grizzled hair bushed out from under his sombrero almost to his shoulders, outland fashion.

"Hi-ya, Donna," he greeted, riding alongside. "Yuh're in the wrong parade, young lady. I recommend yuh turn pronto and dust off in t'other direction."

"Wait! I know all about this. *You're* riding in the wrong direction—"

"What's that yuh say?" Sheriff Clay raised his voice. "Hold up, boys!"

Dust fogged high as men of the posse snubbed to a stop, hemming Donna in near the sheriff. They sat their restless horses silently, as she studied their faces. Hard faces. The eyes holding a glitter. Jaws set in grim, determined lines.

She looked all around the circle. The men looked back at her. Ruthless. Silent. Then what Strap Jor-

don had said was true—this was a hanging posse!

Well, what was the difference if a man had to die? Would the rope feel any easier around his neck if the hanging was legal? But here were these men, silently staring, waiting for her to say the words which would deliver a man into their hands—so they could kill him! They were like a pack of wolves on the blood trail. And how was she any better?

She hadn't thought it would be like this. She had been more than anything else angry at Strap Jordon. But Strap had known. He had tried to tell her.

Her lips opened; she forced out words. "Strap Jordon—when you get him you're going to hang him?"

THE sheriff sighed. "Well, I'm shore afraid when we do git him, the boys'll be right hard to control."

"But he ought to have a chance to go into a court!" she cried.

One of those hard-faced men spoke. "He didn't give old Whip Sallee no chance to talk, ma'am."

"But how do you know for sure—he's the right one?"

"He was caught red-handed," the sheriff told her. "Passin' marked gold acrost the poker table."

"Was it Deck Hefflin called him on it?"

"That's right."

"Deck Hefflin's a card sharp and you all know it! What was to keep him from palming that gold into the stack and claiming Strap put it in?"

"Strap Jordon played the gold all right. Seven of us sittin' in that game and we all seen it."

"We found more of it at his room," another volunteered.

"And if he had a rightful explanation for it, why'd he go for his gun when Hefflin called him, hold everybody off, and fog out of town?"

"You stopped us, Donna," the sheriff remarked pointedly, "to tell us which direction to ride in. Well?"

Her head jerked. "Yes, I can tell you."

"Excuse a old man if he's soundin' off sideways," the sheriff said, his tone going a little gentle, "but the way I hear it, you and this Strap are some sweet on each other, and yuh don't, now, have to tell if yuh don't want to. We kin find him anyhow."

"I'll tell," she said tersely. "All you need to know."

The sheriff nodded. "We're listenin', girl."

"It—it'll be an uncommon large surprise to you." Her words came in a breathless rush. "You want to know where Strap Jordon got that gold? *I* gave it to him!"

The sheriff's sun-beaten face showed no surprise. "Where'd yuh git it, Donna?"

"Where do you think? I took it off the Bleeker stage."

Still no expression of surprise or protest from any one of that hard crew.

"Yuh tryin' to tell us, Donna," the sheriff asked, "that yuh was the lone stick-up? Yuh robbed the Bleeker stage and kilt old Whip Sallee?"

"I—I robbed the stage and— Oh, I didn't mean to kill old Whip. The gun just—seemed to go off— Well, why don't you say something, somebody? What's so surprising about a girl robbing a stage coach? It's been done before."

"Crackerty, yes," the sheriff admitted. "But what motive could yuh of had, Donna? What it most sounds like is that yuh're tryin' to shield Strap Jordon."

"Strap Jordon—I never saw him but once in my life, when—when I gave him that money at the dance to—to—well, never mind what I asked him to do with it! Father said if he showed up again he'd gun him off the place. But Strap's not criminal—just worthless. I'm the one who's criminal. But that's all I'll

say about it till Dad can get a lawyer for me from the city. Then I'll tell why I did it, and where the rest of the gold is— Well, why don't you arrest me—or do you hang girls too?"

The grim men, silently staring, were nodding at each other; lips were moving tensely. Sheriff Clem Clay caught the eyes of several, jerked his head in a barely perceptible nod, and said to Donna in a calm cold voice:

"Yuh got a workin' arrangement with Deck and Shadow Vautt, or how come that .38 of Shadow's layin' acrost yore lap?"

Donna had hoped they would recognize the gun. It should help to bolster her claim to criminal action. This was just what she wanted.

"I'll tell that when I tell the rest of it," she said tersely.

"Reckon we'll be takin' yuh in, Donna," the sheriff said. "There's sure enough smoke—might be some fire."

As she handed over the gun, one black thought assailed her. When Deck and Shadow contacted the posse, would they tell about their meeting with Strap Jordon? Probably not. They wouldn't be proud of that meeting.

Morever, from the way Strap talked, they were all three in some way tied in on the robberies. Those strange words of Strap's: "Wherever yuh think the gold is, yuh're wrong—"

She could count on Deck Hefflin and Shadow to be seeing right now if their stolen gold was safe. But after they had found out, they'd never find Strap Jordon. No one would. That old cellar was so far off the trails that no one ever went there. She had hidden Strap as securely as though she'd locked him on the moon. No one would ever be able to find him.

The thought was somehow comforting.

CHAPTER III

A Bargain

FOR two long hours Donna paced the floor of the Wolf Jaw jail. And then her father came. Through the bars she saw him striding across the street, with the dust spurting from under his bootheels with every forceful step. She heard his voice bellowing through the jail office, and then he was staring at her through the steel door grating.

She had never seen his mustache jut so fiercely. "That scrawny-necked Clem Clay," he growled, "I'll stake him out on cactus nubbins! Jailin' my daughter! What'n tarnation's got into that spindle-legged sheriff?"

"He thinks I robbed the Bleeker stage and—killed old Whip Sallee."

"Huh? The danged old fool! What made him think of that?"

"I—I told him I did."

"Yuh what? Yuh plumb locoed, too?"

"Get me out of here first, Dad. Then we'll talk about it."

"Mighty right I'll git yuh out! If I have to tear this calaboose down with my hands!"

She reached her hand through the bars, pressed it warmly over her father's rough one which was clamped to the jail grating so tightly that the knuckles shone white.

"Don't tell him I didn't rob the stage," she whispered. "I want him to keep on thinking it for a while."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Please," she pleaded. "It means more to me than anything in the world. I'll explain everything afterwards. Do it my way, won't you? *Please!*"

"All right, Donna. I'll pamper yore notion. And I'll git yuh out. Pronto. Wait right here."

After her father had stormed away Donna moved to the barred window.

She could see him clumping down the street toward the sheriff's office. She smiled. It was good to have a father influential enough to get you out of jail when you were supposed to have robbed three stage coaches and murdered someone! And her father would get her out. She had no doubt of that.

Her plan was working beautifully. So long as they believed her guilty, the search would be held up for Strap Jordon. And once she was outside, under bail, paroled to her father, it would be a simple matter to go in the night to Strap, turn him loose from the cellar. When he had cleared country, she could admit that her story was a hoax. They'd probably think she had turned feeble-minded. But Strap would be safe.

OLD Salt-grass Norland stumped into the sheriff's office; the screen door slammed, and the old rancher's voice slammed too, berating Sheriff Clay, calling the sheriff more fighting words than the old lawman had had flung in his face in a whole lifetime of sheriffing. But Clem Clay just sat in his sway-backed swivel chair, his face as mild as a rabbit's, and let Salt-grass run down.

"Sit and take the load offen yore feet, Salt-grass," the sheriff said then.

Salt-grass Norland snorted. He drew a chair close, sat, and started in again. This time Clem Clay stopped him.

"Yuh're lookin' at it lopsided," he said. "Now listen careful to what I got to say."

There was quiet authority in the sheriff's voice, and Norland listened, growling at first, but more absorbed as the sheriff went on. By the time the sheriff was finished he was nodding affirmation.

The sheriff leaned back in his creaking swivel, and Norland stood up. At the door the rancher looked back and grinned in an abashed way.

"Yuh old billy-goat! Who'da thought I'd have to come to the law to learn how to handle my daughter. I've tried everything else to tame her, but I never thought about throwin' her in jail."

Donna was looking out the jail window and she saw her father approaching again. She met him at the door grating.

"You certainly didn't lose much time, Dad," she said, delightedly.

Her father just cleared his throat and took a twist on his cow-prong mustache.

"Well, why don't you unlock me?" she demanded.

"There—there's a little difficulty, Donna—"

"What do you mean?" His voice and his manner disturbed her. She peered at him intently in the jail dimness.

"It ain't so important about the stages yuh robbed, Donna—but murderin' a man, that's different. Old Whip Sallee, he was right well liked—"

"Are you trying to tell me," she demanded, "that you haven't enough influence in Wolf Jaw to get around the sheriff? That's ridiculous!"

"Now don't you worry, honey," he soothed. "I'll beat this case for yuh. Yuh won't have to go to trial, but—"

"But what?"

"It'll be a couple weeks likely, 'fore I kin git yuh outa here."

"A couple of weeks!"

He thought her horror was occasioned by thought of sleeping on the frowsy jail bunk every night for two weeks, and being penned behind bars while all Wolf Jaw stared at her from the outside and grinned.

But what she was thinking was: "Two weeks! In that time, Strap Jordon, in that cellar where no one can find him, without food and without water, will die!"

She gripped the bars hard. "Maybe you'd better tell the sheriff, Dad,

that I was only joking, that I didn't rob or kill—not really."

Even though the hunt should go on, if she was out, maybe she could get to Strap in time to give him a head start on the law hounds.

Her father shook his head. "'S too late now, Donna. They'd think it was jest a father arguin' for his daughter. Nope, there ain't no way I kin clear yuh under two weeks."

She stared at him, her face showing white in the gloom. The menace and sudden death which had reeked about the old cellar where she had locked Strap Jordon was here now so alive that it seemed to crackle. Dust particles in the band of sunlight jutting through the barred windows formed images frightful and shuddering.

She tried to force her brain to think sanely. But she couldn't get around the damning fact that there was no way out for Strap. If she remained in jail, he died of starvation. If she cleared herself by telling what she knew, they would rescue Strap from his cellar prison—but only to hang him!

There was nothing she could do. Unless— There was just a chance that she could get around her father.

SHE faced him squarely. Her voice came low, taut. "I think I know what happened between you and the sheriff. He doesn't really believe I robbed the coach, does he? He's just keeping me to—to use me for bait! He thinks Strap Jordon is in love with me. He knows how crazy-wild Strap is. He thinks that when Strap hears I'm in jail for something he knows I didn't do, that he'll come and try to get me out. The sheriff will just sit and wait for Strap to come. Isn't that it?"

Norland took another twist on his cowprongs. "Seein' as yuh called the turn so close, Donna, I might's well come up on top the grass. That's it."

"Then you might as well know," she said fiercely, "the trap's no good. Strap won't come. I happen to know. He can't."

"Why can't he?"

"He just can't, that's all. You can take my word for it, Dad. Now please order the sheriff to let me out."

"Nope," Norland said stubbornly. "This is one time yuh take yore medicine, young lady. A couple weeks can't hurt yuh."

"But that long will kill Strap!" Her hands on the bars were trembling so that the steel door shook. "Dad, you think you're disciplining me, don't you, for crossing you about Strap? All right, get me out of here and you can have it your way. I'll—I'll pretend like he never lived."

"That's how yuh think now, Donna," he said, with some gentleness. "But like I said, two weeks ain't gonna hurt yuh, and it might work out to rid the county of a wolf."

"All right, you had to hear it!" Her voice was no longer controlled. The words jetted, low, passion-torn. "I love Strap Jordon! You understand? I love him! And if you don't get me out of here I'll hate you as long as I live! I mean that!"

"Now, now," Norland soothed, "yuh're bein' downright womanish. Yuh don't know what yuh're sayin'. But no matter what yuh're sayin', Donna, for once in my life I ain't leavin' yuh talk me outa somethin'. I'm gonna be stubborner'n you are. I'll see yuh git good food sent over from the restaurant, and a feather bed to flop atop that bunk. I'll scare yuh up a book if you want it. But here yuh stay as long as necessary. G'by, Donna."

He stalked out and left her clinging to the bars and sobbing. He thought she was having a temper tantrum, but the grief that tore at her was horribly real.

The utter mess she had made of

things! The sheriff was holding her so Strap would come into his trap. By holding her the sheriff was taking measures against Strap as deadly as lead to the heart. Every hour she stayed here was a milestone on the slow, dread road to starvation for Strap. And she alone was to blame!

What could she do? The question was like a needled *cholla* piercing to her brain. Well, she could cry—and she did. Wrenching sobs which shook her whole body.

Face down on the hard bunk she flung herself. The cloth of her sleeve was sopped with her tears when finally she raised her head; turned her hot face to the little air from the outside that came through the barred windows. Blurred through her tears, she could see two men in the street.

And all at once hope swept through her brain. She knew now what she could do.

In a single swoop she was off the bunk and pressed against the barred window. Her hands poked through, waving frantically. On the board sidewalk across the dusty street two pairs of boots clumped to a stop. Deck Hefflin looked at Shadow Vautt, and Shadow looked at Deck; they both shrugged and looked across at Donna. Then they stepped off the sidewalk and started toward the jail.

Deck Hefflin's brutish grin was showing, and his little eyes in his little round head bored at her when the two men loomed dimly in the jail corridor.

"Beauty in distress, huh? The boys tell me yuh lay claim to all the stage coach robbin' around here," he sneered.

She smiled at him. Her face felt so stiff it seemed it would crack now from strain of the unnatural smile.

"I reckon I owe both you boys an apology for the way I acted." Her voice was husky, provocative.

Deck Hefflin blinked his little eyes in surprise at her affability. He moved closer to the steel door grating. Her blue eyes looked through one of the squares and she spoke through another.

"One time you said you wanted to marry me. Did you mean it?"

"Did then. Don't now."

"Oh, so you don't want me now?"

"Didn't say I didn't want yuh. What the hell—any man would want yuh."

"But you don't want to marry me? Well, Deck, I—I'm not in much of a position to bargain about that!"

"Huh? How you mean?"

"Just this. I'm in trouble. I'll make a deal with you. Get me out of here. Tonight. And I'll ride away with you on your own terms."

"How do I know yuh would?"

Her voice was a little wild now. "Why, what else *could* I do? I'm a jailbird now, Deck. You could always turn me in."

Deck was breathing hard and he said, "Yeah," two or three times. He looked at Shadow Vautt standing at his elbow, then at Donna. He bent and kissed her through one of the crisscross squares of the grating. She kissed him back, though she was sure she would have to get lye and wash out her mouth.

Deck turned his cheek toward the grating. "Now kiss there where your finger scratches are," he ordered.

She did, quelling her revulsion.

CHAPTER IV

Jail Delivery

AFTER Deck and Shadow were gone Donna sat alone in her cell, appalled at the bargain she had made. Could that have been she, Donna Norland, acting so brazenly? The fools some men could be! Deck Hefflin must know she hated and despised him.

But she had lulled him with no trouble at all.

A wisp of a sardonic smile touched her lips. Deck Hefflin should have known she had no intention of going through with her bargain. She was fighting for the life of the man she loved and she was using whatever weapons were at hand. They were only woman's weapons. But whatever their effect woman's weapons never left a man twitching and bloody in the dust, with lead in his heart.

Woman's weapons would buy her freedom. With the watchers ambushing the trails into town, it would be simple for Deck and Shadow to get her out of jail.

After that she would watch her chance. It should be easier to escape from Deck and Shadow than from this cell. But one disquieting thought would not down. Deck Hefflin was a brute, and one smash of his fist— She shuddered.

THE path of barred sunlight which streamed across the floor from the window pinched out as the afternoon wore away. The cell grew dim, then dark. Donna sat and waited. Until well after midnight sounds of revelry reached her from the Shag-Hoof Saloon and others of like stripe.

When there were no more bursts of music, no boisterous laughs, hoarse voices, still she sat and waited. Once the thought came to her how much of a woman's life was spent in waiting. But most of the time she was thinking of Strap and of how she could get to him after she was freed from the jail.

Then suddenly, crashing loud on the still night air, a shot! Clattering echoes rolled along the jail corridor. Another shot followed the first. Not quite so loud. Not .45 thunder. From the sound it was probably one of Shadow Vautt's deadly .38s.

Donna jerked stiffly upright on the bunk. It wasn't the shots so much as the scream of agony she heard which made her lips press and her hands clench. She knew what had happened. Deck and Shadow were making their raid. Something had gone wrong and they had let the jail guard have it.

She stood up, pressing hard against the dark cell wall to stay her trembling. Outside were the men she had made a deal with, a deal which was to have brought life. But already it had brought death, she guessed. Where would it end? With her own death? With Strap's?

No time to think. There were footsteps in the dark corridor. A rattling scrape of metal as the big jail key found the lock. The door creaked open.

Deck Hefflin's hated voice sounded. "Come on! Where the hell are yuh? We got to make tracks. All Wolf Jaw'll be poppin'."

From out of the darkness his breath, hot and whiskey-fetid, struck her like a physical force. And then his hands were on her, pawing.

She tried to pull away. His thick hand chopped out against her face. She felt a blanket being thrust against her.

"Sling it over yore head like a shawl—like a Mexican woman wears. Keep yore face hid when we git outside. Come on—this's gotta be fast," he rasped.

"It can't be fast enough," Shadow Vautt's rasping whisper sounded. "Lights blinkin' on outside. We gotta make a run for it."

Deck lunged her along through the corridor. "Yuh had to gun that guard and sound an alarm!" he lashed at Shadow.

"You gunned him first!" Shadow snarled back. "Hell, it's over now. Git set for more gunnin'."

In the aroused town smoking lamps were slanting oblong patterns of light from the windows, across

the white street. Doors were slamming. Hoarse voices shouted. From down past the Shag-Hoof came the sound of hurrying boots clumping on the wooden sidewalk, and from out beyond the edge of town where the trail was being watched, was wafted the sound of galloping hoofs as men rode in to investigate the shooting.

At the outside door, shoved along by Deck Hefflin, Donna stumbled across something firmly yielding. The huddled body of the jail guard who had taken a slug from both Deck and Shadow!

And this was the pair she had set out to match wits against in a desperate effort to save Strap Jordon! Of what use were wits against knuckled fists and tearing lead? She had never felt so hopeless as now at the very moment of her escape!

The next instant Deck was swinging her off her feet, slamming her into saddle. He swung heavily up behind her.

"Can't trust yuh with a bronc of yore own—not jest yet," he jerked, as he wheeled the horse.

Before the pepper trees at the end of the lot could shield them, six-guns were making sullen flare from the open street. Gun-echoes clattered between the high false fronts of the wooden buildings and slugs whanged past so close that Donna held her breath.

"Blast 'em wide!" Deck roared to Shadow.

His gun and Shadow's opened up, shooting fast. The heavy six was like crashing thunder in Donna's ears. For a moment the saffron gun-flares blooming from the street blotted out as men ducked for cover. The great-breasted bronc, easily carrying double, lunged on. In that breathless moment Donna thought they were going to make it.

But then she knew they would not!

Lethal flares bloomed anew as the men of Wolf Jaw took up firing again. From between buildings, behind hitch-racks, from flat on the ground, they blasted lead in a continuous thunder roaring. Donna felt the bronc miss a step as he was creased by a bullet.

Deck Hefflin's six-shooter was booming. Something jerked at her hair. She reached up her hand. It came away wet with blood, and she knew she had been creased.

Deck leaned far out of saddle and shouted something at Shadow Vautt. Shadow reared his horse around and, still shooting, hoofed hard in the other direction. Deck stayed with him. They reached the blacksmith yard with its clutter of implements and wagons in varying stages of repair. Bullets reached out for them, splintering through the wood of the wagons and through the shop.

But they made it safely behind the darkly bulking building. On they plunged and into the cover of old man Larrop's feed barn. From the main street sounded the hoof-drumming of those horses which had been ridden in from outside of town.

"Now's our chance!" Deck growled. "They've all rid in from watchin' the trail. They think it's Strap Jordon slipped 'em. While they're in town, scrousin' for us, we'll double back to the trail."

IT was close figuring. But they worked it without a hitch. They walked their horses silently across the street at the upper end of town, and by the time the Wolf Jaw riders were combing the shadows behind the blacksmith shop and feed barn, Deck and Shadow—and Donna Norland—were past the bottle-neck on the trail and in thick greasewood cover.

Jail and the Wolf Jaw bullets were behind Donna. Just one more thing she had to do—slip Deck and Shadow. Wedged into the same saddle with Deck Hefflin there didn't

seem much chance, but she didn't lose hope.

Shadow Vautt's voice oozed out of the darkness "They'll cut our trail comin' out of town With us ridin' three on two we can't hold ahead. We'll be losin' enough time stoppin' off for the gold. Why don't we jest heave the excess baggage out of saddle?"

"Not 'lessen we have to," Deck decided. "Hell, we worked hard enough gittin' it."

"Plenty more of the same in Mexico. Yuh always claimed yuh liked the dark ones best."

"That was 'fore I seen this blondie."

DONNA held her breath, aghast at such casual talk. Excess baggage! Mexico! What death-on-earth was awaiting her with these two men?

Shadow's odious whisper sounded again. "We'd ought of looked up the gold this afternoon. Saved us some time now."

"Yeah, but we couldn't see this comin'. And Strap Jordon hangin' around so close—wasn't worth the risk. We don't want to cut that wolf in."

"Not if we kin help it. But he's got a plumb bad habit of cuttin' hisself in on our business. I been worryin' ever since he said that about: 'Wherever yuh think the gold is—yuh're wrong.' How do we know he ain't snagged onto it like he hinted?" he questioned.

Deck Hefflin cursed savagely. "Use some sense, Shadow. If he had it he wouldn't be hintin'. He only wanted to scare us into lookin', so he could foller us and find out where."

Donna listened avidly, snatching what knowledge she could. Their talk seemed to establish even more firmly what everybody believed already—that Strap Jordon was lined against the law. Whether or not he had been associated with Deck and Shadow in the stage holdups, and then had broken with them, she couldn't be sure. She judged it more likely that he was a lone-wolf outlaw.

Oddly, though, what Jordon was or what he wasn't, didn't loom large. She thought of him only as the man she loved, the man whose life depended solely upon her efforts. She had got him into this deadly fix; she, alone, could get him out. She noted with growing excitement that the trail Deck and Shadow were striking was carrying them in the general direction of Jordon's cellar prison. It would though, naturally, since they were headed toward Mexico.

Across the band of sheeted malpai rock they rode. The black lava beds glinted under the moon like water. When they came out on the other side, Donna was breathless at how close to the cellar prison they were.

Here was the place she must make her break; rescue Strap Jordon. And Strap Jordon's six-gun which she had discarded this morning in favor of Shadow Vautt's lighter .38 should be easy to find.

Through catclaw and willows they came out on the sloping bank of Jumping Fish Creek. For easier riding they veered back a little way in among the cottonwoods. Bulking huge in the night, the black trees raked long branches over their heads. They had to duck to clear some of them. That gave Donna her idea.

She had been sitting still in saddle for a long time. But suddenly she snapped into action like dynamite exploding. Her elbows dug back, jabbing into Deck Hefflin's midriff, and then in one coordinated motion her outstretched arms reached high.

She felt her hands smack the overhead branch. Bark peeled away under her clawing fingers, and for a second she thought her arms would pull out at the shoulders. But she hung on, lifted her weight out of

saddle. A frightened forward lunge of the horse made her bootheels rake across Deck Hefflin's chest and face.

He cursed and grabbed out for her. She kicked hard and felt herself hanging free. She dropped. The black earth slapped her feet with stunning force, pitching her on her face.

Deck and Shadow had reared their broncs around and were crashing back. Donna rolled clear from under the plunging hoofs, crouched for an instant behind the bole of a cottonwood, then scurried like a rabbit, holding to the blackest shadows, tense and excited.

Deck and Shadow unhorsed and came lunging after her. She could hear them cursing. She had guessed that, with a posse almost certainly pursuing, they wouldn't risk shooting.

She was right. They didn't shoot and Donna, heart bursting, breath stabbing, nevertheless kept her wits and played the deadly game of hide and seek—to win. Holing in when they came close, making quick darts from shadow to shadow, she worked in among the creek-fringing willows. From then on it was easy. She lost them in the thicket. She waited until she could hear them clumping back to their horses, Deck sulphuring the air with his curses. Then she crept through the willows to the place where Jumping Fish Creek ran into Flat Branch, to the place where, only this morning, she had waited with such breathlessness for Strap Jordon.

She found the six-gun, lying there with sullen glimmer in the sifting moonlight, precisely where she had plunked it after jerking it from Jordon's holster. She picked it up and hurried on in the darkness like a flitting wraith.

There was no time to lose. Would she be able to save Strap Jordon? She must not fail!

CHAPTER V

Underground Battle

DONNA reached the weed-grown clearing where the house had so long ago burned down. Under the pale moon glow she could make out some of the old foundation rocks that poked out of the weeds like jagged teeth. And over all was that silent menace, that feel of close death.

She crept close to the earth-mounded cellar on tiptoe. The cellar was like a monstrous grave. Sealing in hopes. Sealing in life.

But she could break open that grave!

She rounded the heaped rocks of the fallen house chimney and came within close view of the stone steps which led down to the cellar door. She stood stock still. The cellar was already opened!

The bar had been lifted from in front of the door. The door gaped wide.

From the darkness within the cellar she could see yellow light feebly flickering. Someone with a lighted match. The match went out. But in that instant before the blackness swooped in, she had recognized the two men who were here—Deck Hefflin and Shadow Vautt!

A kind of frozen stillness encased her body. It seemed to stop even her breathing, her heart. Why were Deck and Shadow here? What had they done to Strap Jordon? They must have killed him. No shot had sounded. But there were other ways to kill a man. For instance, the heavy barrel of a six-gun crashed against the skull!

Tight-gripping the six-shooter she moved closer. Another match flared under the rasp of Deck Hefflin's thumb nail. In the brief spill of yellow light the cellar was revealed. Deck and Shadow stood there alone.

No other man in sight. Strap was gone!

How was that possible?

Deck and Shadow were asking each other the same question. But not about Strap Jordon. About something else which was gone.

The two men were crouched with their backs to Donna, pawing furiously into the clay floor.

"The gold ain't here!" Deck's bludgeoning voice snarled.

"It's got to be here!" Shadow Vautt scraped out fierce answer.

"Yuh kin see it ain't! I knowed somethin' was wrong the minute I seen the door barred. We never left it like that."

"It was yore idea," Shadow rasped. "Holin' the gold in here till after excitement had died down over the stage stick-ups. Yore idea. Yuh better find a quick way out about it."

"Yuh talk like yuh figger I lifted it," Deck snarled.

SHADOW'S voice was a venomous purr. "I'm plumb glad yuh understand me so well."

"Easy, Shadow," Deck cautioned. "We'll look around here more. Mebbe we got it mixed exactly where we buried it. Under some of this trash, mebbe. Lot o' loose dirt, wood chips, chunks of plaster and such."

"Think quicker'n that, Deck. You know we buried it right where it ain't!"

"Yeah," Deck muttered nervously, "we did. Then it must be Strap Jordon! 'Member he said the gold wasn't where I thought it was?" He cursed fervently. "If I could lay eyes on that slick gunnie—"

Another match flared under his thumb nail—and Deck Hefflin had his wish.

But Donna, peering from beyond the doorway, saw Strap Jordon first. With the first bloom of yellow light she saw him, like an avenging specter, rising up from where he had wedged himself in the loose dirt against the wall when he had heard Deck and Shadow fumbling outside the barred cellar door. His rangy body left the floor in a leap toward the outlaws. He held something between his hands.

Swerving at the sound the outlaws saw him almost as soon as Donna did. Cursing, they went for their guns. Deck dropped his lighted match, but by the last flare of that yellow flame both men sent direct pointblank shots.

Strap's leap had carried him almost close enough to touch them before their guns blasted in twin roars. The concussion in the confined space was terrific. Gun-echoes rolled and crashed and Donna screamed in that moment of out-reaching death.

Seeing Strap Jordon take the lead from off the very muzzles of two guns, she could no more have held back that scream than she could fly. Blackness closed over everything as she heard Deck's harsh voice shout:

"The girl's here somewhere!"

"Shut up!" Shadow rasped.

"Don't worry," Deck growled. "If he'd had a gun he'd of used it. Anyway we punched him full o' holes."

"Strike another match."

"Wait a minute. Listen."

There was a stir from somewhere on the floor.

"Jest his dead body twitchin'," Vautt said callously.

"I'll feed it some more lead for luck."

Again Donna screamed. But this time she meant to. She did it to divert their attention.

"Light that match," Shadow whispered fiercely. "So we kin see to git out of here. I'll choke that screech-owl woman of yores."

Again a quick flood of match-light pushed the darkness back. Donna had one glimpse inside before she ducked away. That glimpse was deliriously revealing. There was no bullet-raked body on the floor. Strap was nowhere in sight! But glinting

up from the floor were a million golden flecks.

"Holdin' our gold poke in front of him!" Deck jerked savagely. "Our lead rammed the poke — not him! Now our gold's scattered to hell and gone over the floor. Take a week to pan it!"

Shadow's whispering rasp cut in. "Let's git him and git out—'fore the posse comes slammin' down on us. He's got to be in here! Hold that match to flash the corner."

"There he is!"

Deck's gun blazed, rocking the cellar with its thunder.

But he wasn't firing in the corner. He was shooting out the door. He had glimpsed Donna limned against the lighter darkness outside and thought he saw Strap Jordon. The shot whipped past Donna so close that she felt its hot breath.

THE match burned out between Deck's flinty thumb and finger, and at the same instant Donna made a flying leap inside the cellar door.

"Strap, I'm coming to you!" she shouted. "I've got your gun!"

She flung a handful of dirt toward Deck and Shadow, in the wan hope that it might make them aim wild when they shot. It may have worked. For the bullets reaching out for her gouged the floor under her feet, *spl-aa-tting* against the rock wall and ricocheting. But none of them stopped her.

She didn't throw lead in answer to their gun flares because she didn't want to reveal her exact position, and because she wanted to save a full gun cylinder for Strap Jordon. Liable to be no time for reloading, and Jordon, far better than she, could direct those bullets in this kind of shooting.

He was waiting for her with arms outstretched. She bumped against him in the darkness, pressed the gun into his hand. He didn't say anything, just flung her flat on the floor and leaped to one side, purposely making noise, to attract bullets away from her.

The lead came searching fast enough, twin saffron blasts which shook the floor. But Jordon wasn't shot. At least he wasn't killed! His .45 thundered in answer.

It roared a third time. From close in! Donna sobbed in her throat. The fool! The crazy fool—he was carrying the fight right into their guns! To make short work of everything, to protect her from any stray lead, he was ramming in, taking their lead almost in his teeth!

All three were blasting now, gun roars welling with dynamite force, gun flashes mingling their lurid flame. Bullets *zanged*, and *pludded*, spattering lead from the smooth rock walls.

But not all of those bullets reached the walls. Some imbedded in human flesh. Shadow Vautt's .38 sounded taps first of all. Then one of the .45s gave up the ghost.

Somebody laughed. Donna couldn't tell who. It was wild laughter, jerked from lips in gun triumph. One man of the three—alive! And stumbling toward her! She could hear every scraping step. She shrank to the wall.

Then, from out of the dark, hands were on her. They trembled. She trembled, too. But no longer from fear. She recognized this touch. These weren't the pudgy, pawing hands of Deck Hefflin. She relaxed, sobbing, in the firm, lean arms of Strap Jordon.

"Yuh mighta been killed!" he said huskily. "Runnin' into their bullets to bring me that gun!"

"*I* might have been killed!" She clung to him with every quivering muscle. "Oh, Strap!"

There didn't seem to be much more of importance for either of them to say. In the darkness they found each other's lips.

It wasn't many moments after-

wards that the posse found them. Holding close out of Wolf Jaw on the trail of the horse riding double, Clem Clay's posse had been near enough to catch the roll of gun thunder, and they had come a-humping.

Donna and Strap Jordon came out of the cellar to meet them.

"Go high!" the sheriff ordered.

Donna stared at him indignantly. But to Jordon the order wasn't wholly unexpected. Ringed by the posse, he had little choice. He holstered his six, lifted hands even with his shoulders.

Three of the possemen, ducking inside the cellar, came out dragging the dead bodies of Deck Hefflin and Shadow Vautt. Then they went back for handfuls of the dirt with gold in dust and nuggets glinting in it. One man had a miner's oil flare lamp. Under the smoky flame the gold came alive in gleaming yellow glints.

"Crackerty!" Sheriff Clay blazed. "Have we, now, made a haul! The Angel Wing gold, two dead hooters and one live one. And a lady jailbreaker!"

"Not bad, Sheriff," Strap Jordon said tightly. "Yuh're a little late gittin' here to be in on the heavy fireworks but, for a local enforcement officer, not bad. Yuh only made one mistake."

THE sheriff bristled. "What's that?"

"The live hooter, bein' me—I ain't no hooter."

"Yeah? What yuh callin' yoreself?"

Donna pushed forward into the threatening guns. "I'll call it for him! He's the nerviest gun-fighter for the law that's ever racked into Wolf Jaw! So there! While you and the rest of 'em were playing night tag out in the malpai, Strap Jordon was meeting these two in gunner's showdown!"

"Case o' thieves fallin' out, I reckon," the sheriff said dryly. "It'll save the county the price of two hang ropes. Only need one now."

Donna stared in cold shock. She had thought the danger to Jordon was over. Whatever his crimes, he had certainly paid for them by this night's work. In common justice. But what had led her to expect justice from these men? All grim and silent! Wolves haunched around their kill. Yes, in the bleak night-light they looked more like wolves than men!

She felt weakness, in a wave, sweep from her face to her feet. She swayed. Somebody was talking. She heard the voice distantly, without really grasping the words.

"If yuh ain't no gunhawk, what the hell are yuh?" the sheriff was asking.

"I'm a U. S. deputy marshal," Strap Jordon told him.

"Think faster, young feller," the sheriff jabbed.

"It's true. I tailed Deck and Shadow into Wolf Jaw out of Wyomin'. They're wanted for a stage killin' there. The evidence wasn't none too tight, so I strung along here, waitin' for 'em to catch their toe on a new job."

"That's yore story, huh? Lessee yore credentials."

"They're in my room at the hotel—badge and papers."

There was an angry stir from men forming the gun-ring. The sheriff silenced it when he said, fiercely:

"No they ain't! We went over yore room hide'n hair today. They wasn't nothin' to show yuh're a U. S. deputy marshal."

"Ain't we had enough palaver, Clem?" one of the possemen growled. "Let's be cartin' him back to jail, or hang him, one."

"String him high!" someone cried from the back of the crowd.

There was an instinctive forward surge. Donna came out of her faintness. For the last moment or two she had been in that unhappy half-

alive state, sensing what was going on, but having no volition to do anything about it. But now she threw off the nightmare incubus. New life charged through her veins.

She had just remembered something. Deck Hefflin had raided Strap Jordon's hotel room. He had stolen her note to Jordon. He must have taken Strap's credentials, too. Yes, that was it!

"Wait!" Donna called. "Look through Deck Hefflin's pockets!"

They looked and they found it—the badge and papers—in a sealed envelope which Deck had not as yet had time, or curiosity enough, to open and examine.

"Hum-m," the sheriff muttered. "That five thousand the Angel Wing Mines put up—reckon it's yores."

"Reckon not," Strap Jordon told him. "I'm a U. S. deputy marshal, not a bounty gunner."

"But I'm a bounty gunner," Donna told him, later. "No scruples at all where you're concerned. I've been gunning for you from the first!"

He smiled. "Yuh're a jailbird," he said softly. "That's what you are. I'm a Federal lawman. I'm seein' yuh git life—in my arms!"

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

RAWHIDE GAP GUNSMOKE

A Novelette of Love's Stampede

By WILTON WEST

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Hearts and Hemp

Beth Is On Don Gannon's String and Cupid Gives Him Plenty of Rope!

By

EUGENE A. CLANCY

Author of "The Bill o' Sale," "Dynamite on Thunder," etc.

BETH HARTLEY'S blue eyes were troubled. She was sitting on the top step of the Circle H veranda, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands. Pat Hartley, her father, lolled in an old rocker behind her, his foul and blackened pipe in his mouth. The small outfit, with the exception of Cole Mattson, the hulking, beetle-browed foreman, and Don Gannon, newest addition to the Circle H, were out on the distant north range. Supper was long over. Mattson had ridden back from a day in Twin Forks, the straggling cowtown some seven miles down the main trail through the valley.

But Don Gannon had not ridden back with Mattson. This would make the third time within a week that the big young waddy who had come riding out of nowhere had failed to come back from town. There was

"Say it yuh rat!" the waddy grated

hurt in Beth's soft, long-lashed eyes, half closed under the wide brim of her big Stetson. Don was careless, reckless, but of late there had been something else. He was acting strangely. There seemed no other explanation; he was deliberately avoiding her.

"Don ought to be back, Dad," she said, without turning her head. "I don't like it!"

"It's what yuh git for pesterin' him too much!" said Pat Hartley. Little Pat Hartley, grizzled and peppery, was not given to mincing his words, even with his lovely daughter, whom he worshiped. He took his pipe from his mouth.

"Shucks, gal, when yuh throw yoreself at a man's head, 'specially a big galoot's head, he's liable to stampede!" he chuckled. "I reckon Don is shore gittin' hisself a skin full of likker an' raisin' hell. I'm goin' to bed." He got up and went into the house, chuckling to himself.

LEFT alone on the moonlit veranda, Beth flushed and bit her red lip. Throwing herself at his head! It wasn't true—it *wasn't!* It was Cole Mattson who had put that into Dad's head. Cole had done it because he had tried to make love to her, asked her to marry him, and she had turned him down flat. She would just as soon marry a horned toad. Cole had hated Don from the first moment he saw him; she had seen it in those evil black eyes of his.

Suddenly she got to her feet, tugged the gunbelt buckled around her slim waist, and went down the steps and around to the rear of the house, a slight, golden-haired figure in dusty boots, overalls, and a man's shirt. Beth Hartley was all cowgirl, and was as distracting in her rough range togs as if she wore the swellest "dude" outfit.

Her red lips set, she strode abruptly into the bunkhouse. Cole Mattson took his feet down from a table and stood up. He smiled at her, but Cole Mattson's smile always filled her with instinctive distrust and a certain fear of the man. The thing he intended for a pleasant smile was a leer.

She had not wanted to question Mattson and had put it off, hoping to see Don come loping up the ravine that led to the house. But she could wait no longer. Some premonition of trouble was gnawing at her; she did not realize this fully until now, looking up into Cole Mattson's leering eyes.

She gave him a little, unsmiling nod.

"Why didn't Don ride back with you, Cole?" she asked directly. Beth Hartley was too straight-thinking to beat about the bush. "Where did you leave him?"

The gangling, stoop-shouldered foreman, who wore a short beard to hide certain scars on his jaw and chin, looked at her in an odd way, a frown in his jet-black eyes.

"I left him gittin' drunk in the saloon with a couple of mighty strange jaspers!" he replied, his voice grating. "I ain't playin' nurse to Don Gannon!"

"Getting drunk!" Beth exclaimed, her blue eyes glistening with anger. "I don't believe you, Cole!"

"Yuh, wouldn't!" the foreman said in his grating voice. "But yuh'd believe it of me fast enough if Don Gannon told yuh *I* was drunk, wouldn't yuh?"

"You'd better control your tongue, Cole Mattson!" she said angrily. "What's the matter with you? Did you have a fight with Don? You tell me pronto!"

"When I fight with Don Gannon," said the man, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, "yuh'll know it. He won't come ridin' back at all. He'll be dead!"

Beth's heart pounded; she almost shrank back. The light in Cole Mattson's eyes was something she had

never seen there before—a deadly gleam, sheer, wicked menace.

"You'd better not talk like that!" she said, trembling in spite of herself. "You're letting your hatred of him do things to you, Cole. Don hasn't done a thing to you."

"Ain't he?" said Mattson, with a coarse leer. He took a step closer to her. "Yuh been loco ever since he came here, an' he's been fillin' yuh full of his slicker lies about me."

"He's never said a word against you!" Beth cried.

"He's makin' a fool of yuh!" said Mattson, thrusting his leering face forward, his tone almost savage. "But I'll tell yuh somethin' now. I've been watchin' that hombre, and yuh're goin' ter find out mighty quick that he ain't nothin' but a crooked saddle-tramp! He ain't never told yuh nothin' about himself, has he—nor anybody else, neither."

For no very good reason Beth felt herself trembling; strange doubts crowded her mind for a moment. She shook them off, but she came to a swift decision.

"I don't like your attitude tonight, Cole," she said. "You—you don't look right! Saddle up Nipper. I'm riding."

She saw the foreman start. "Where yuh ridin'?" he demanded.

"To Twin Forks!" said Beth, looking up at him steadily. "I'm going to see Don at once—"

She broke off with a gasp of amazement as Mattson suddenly caught her by the arm.

"Yuh ain't goin' to leave this ranch tonight!" he grated, and Beth was sure that she saw both fear and consternation in his eyes. "I've stood enough of yuh makin' a fool of *me!*"

"You let me go!" Beth said hotly, though her heart skipped a beat. "I'm ridin for Twin Forks!"

"Yuh're stayin' right here!" said Mattson, his face close to hers. "Yuh ain't havin' no more midnight meetin's with Don Gannon, yuh dirty little tramp! I'll fix yuh as well as him!"

He twisted her arm, then dropped it, and stood leering at her.

FOR an instant Beth merely stared at him, her red lips parted; then something snapped in her brain. Her soft cheeks went white under the deep tan, then flushed hotly. Beth Hartley saw red. Her hand flashed to her holster, flashed up, and she struck at him blindly with the gun before he could jerk his head back or grab her.

There was all the force of her outraged heart back of that blow. More by chance than deliberate intent, the gun caught him square on the temple. Through the red haze that danced before her eyes she saw him clutch at the table, reel, then crash to the floor, where he lay still, blood dripping from the ugly gash.

The range girl caught her breath, her heart thumping madly. She looked down at him dazedly. Then the red haze lifted and her brain steadied. Dropping her gun into the holster, she bent over him, then straightened up with a gasp of relief. She had not killed him. The ugly gash was not as bad as it looked; he was knocked senseless, but in a few minutes consciousness would return.

Beth shuddered. As he clutched at the table, she had looked into his jet-black eyes and had seen the murderous hate that fairly leaped in them. Instinct, swift intuition told her that her action had touched off the dynamite in the man's evil nature; he would throw caution to the winds now, show no mercy. Panic gripped her.

He would take it out on Don!

Her glance fell on her saddle on the floor in a corner. She grabbed it up and ran from the bunkhouse. In two minutes she roped her pony

from the corral, threw the saddle on, and mounted. She hesitated only a moment, glancing up at her father's window. The light was out; old Pat went to sleep the instant his head hit the pillow. She thought of getting him up and telling him, but dismissed the idea. Cole would not harm him; the foreman's rage would be directed against her—and against Don. She dug heels and raced into the twisting ravine.

"Thank Heaven he isn't riding in just now!" she said to herself, as she bent low over the pony's neck and urged it into a furious gallop. "That devil was laying for him tonight, perhaps to kill him while he slept. I'm certain of it! I could see it in his murderous eyes! Faster, Nipper, there's something very wrong tonight, wrong everywhere! If anything has already happened to Don—"

Despite the panic that rode with her in the saddle, a soft light suddenly glowed in her eyes, a rare light. She knew something else now, knew it as a fact that set her heart racing with the pony's thudding hooves. She loved Don Gannon.

The big, grey-eyed, rather morose and silent waddy meant more to her than anything else on earth! Perhaps, as dad seemed to think, he did not really care; but her heart could not lie! And even it were true that she was just dreaming silly range-girl dreams, she could not let him come riding home and step into that bunkhouse without warning. When Cole Mattson came to his senses, he would be in a vicious, killing rage.

She pulled up short as she galloped onto the main trail across the open mesa, now flooded with brilliant moonlight. A rider was galloping toward her from Twin Forks. Her eyes flashed with relief. Few riders hit the trail at night. That would be Don now; and so far he was safe. Nothing had happened to him in town.

The light of relief faded from her eyes as the rider thudded up to her and drew rein. It was not Don Gannon. It was Ben Henderson, the white-haired, grim-faced Sheriff of Twin Forks. Something in his manner brought a queer constriction to Beth's throat.

"Ben!" she managed to say. "Tell me—pronto! Has anything happened to Don Gannon?"

"Take it easy, Beth," said the old sheriff. "I was comin' to see you an' Pat. Don's all right, 'cept that I've got him in the jail."

"In the jail!" Beth gasped. "Ben—you mean—he got into a fight?"

"I reckon I'd better let yuh have it straight, Beth," said Ben Henderson in a kindly tone, evidently trying to soften the blow. "I had to arrest Don Gannon for being the jasper who held up the Rimrock stage the other night an' got away with the Silver Mine payroll. There don't seem to be much doubt about it."

"IT'S a lie!" cried Beth. "You *know* Don Gannon just couldn't be guilty of such a thing!"

"He was playin' poker with a couple of strangers in the saloon," said the sheriff. "Don shore flashed a lot of money for a cowhand. They got into a fight over a deal; then one of the jaspers accused Don of bein' a stickup, sayin' he recognized him as a feller wanted in a couple of places. I was noticin' somethin' myself, Beth. Don was rollin' smokes from a new brand of terbaccer, a red and yellow sack, an' I was thinkin'.

"The express box on that stage was busted open, an' it contained a lot of them red an' yellow sacks, samples of this here new terbaccer. Some rannies 'round these parts still don't like Don, on account of him bein' new an' mighty tight-lipped. I had to disarm him an' search him. There weren't nothin'; but in the

warbag on his hoss we found a red mask. The stickup that night wore a red mask. There wasn't nothin' for me to do but arrest him, 'specially as he wouldn't talk an' shore acted like a feller caught red-handed."

"I don't believe it!" Beth cried, but her thoughts were in a turmoil; she felt suddenly sick. It just could not be; yet he had been acting strangely. "These two men he was playing poker with!" she said, her small hands holding the reins in a tense grip. "You mean you took their word—"

"They was identified," said the sheriff. "A couple of gamblers from down the Border, but nothin' else agin them. Fleck Donner, owner of the saloon, vouched for them."

"Fleck Donner!" Beth echoed. "A fine fellow if there ever was one, and the pal of another prize package, Cole Mattson."

HER eyes flashed—Cole! "Listen, Ben!" she said tensely. "Tell me somethin'. Was Cole Mattson there when this happened?"

"Why, no," Ben Henderson replied, looking at her in a curious, covert way that Beth was too excited to notice. "Cole left mebbe an hour afore the ruckus started. I know yuh don't like Cole none, Beth, an' yuh been wantin' yore dad to fire him for over a year, but yuh got to try an' face facts. Cole ain't anythin' to do with this."

"I think he has!" Beth cried, her blue eyes glistening in the moonlight. "You know that he hates Don, would do anything to get Don into trouble! He showed his hand to me tonight."

"Listen, Beth, honey," said old Ben, his tone kindly, but a little impatient. "I've known yuh since yuh was born. I know yuh're sweet on Don Gannon; quite a few folks knows it. This here is tough on yuh, an' I'm shore mighty sorry for yuh, honey, but I'm suggestin' yuh have a good cry when yuh git home an' fergit it. Yuh allus was a little thoroughbred."

He broke off and his head jerked up. Beth tensed. A rider was bearing down on them from Twin Forks. In a few moments he drew to a slithering stop, and Beth recognized him as a waddy from one of the ranches down the valley.

"Yuh better hit back for town pronto, Sheriff!" he said excitedly. "Gannon's busted out of yore jail! Pulled an old trick on yore dumb deputy; he got him to come too close to the bars an' grabbed him!"

"What the hell!" old Ben exploded. "Where'd he go! Ain't none of yuh got him?"

"There's general hell to pay in town!" the waddy said. "Nobody knows what to do; yuh're shore needed bad! There's liable to be a general shindy; more'n half the town don't believe that Gannon was the stickup! Them two gamblers got drunk an' started to quarrel with each other, sayin' some mighty queer things! Then somebody busted inter the saloon yellin' that Gannon was loose an' comin', an' them two gamblers yelled that Cole Mattson had doublecrossed 'em! They run out an' hightailed for the Mex quarter, Gannon after 'em! There's shore hell to pay—an' Cole Mattson seems to be in it somehow—it's about the stickup of that stage."

Beth Hartley did not hear any more. Her heart racing, her eyes shining, she dug heels and sent Nipper galloping madly on toward Twin Forks. She did not look back; she did not know or care that the sheriff and the waddy were pounding directly behind her. She raced into town, vaulted from the saddle in front of the Twin Forks Saloon, and ran up the steps. She pushed through the swinging doors—and then she stood there.

Don Gannon, his overalls torn,

blood on his face, his thick brown hair matted and tousled, was standing over a white faced, cringing man with his back against the bar. Beth pushed her way through the crowd of grim men who were leaving a cleared space in front of the bar. She tried to call to the waddy, but the words stuck in her throat as she saw the glitter in his grey eyes, the hard, menacing smile on his lips. He had the white-faced man by the throat now. He shook him. Beth glimpsed the sheriff entering and shoving to the front; but there old Ben Henderson stopped.

"Say it, yuh rat!" the waddy grated. "Spill it again so's the sheriff an' everybody kin hear it!"

"Yuh got me—I'll spill it, Gannon!" the man gasped. "But they can't hang me; I didn't do it myself, I tell yuh! It was Jed, my pardner yuh jest plugged out there; it was him was the stickup! But it was Cole Mattson, the damn, double-crossin' skunk who got us to go into this! He said he had everythin' fixed—I swear it—yuh'll find the money in an old saddle bag in the Circle H bunkhouse."

"TELL the sheriff what I saw in Chalk Canyon yesterday!" Don grated, shaking him again.

"All right yuh *did* see us, Gannon!" said the man desperately. "Me an' Jud met Mattson there. He told us he'd planted the red mask in yore bag, an' he gave me that red an' yaller terbaccer sack."

"The one yuh give me while we was playin' poker an' said I could keep!" said Don, while Beth caught the excited murmur of the tense, listening crowd. "Didn't Mattson tell yuh to do that, too?"

"Yuh've got it right, I tell yuh!" said the man. "But I tell yuh it was Mattson; he framed it so's he could git that girl!" His panic-stricken gaze went over the heads of the crowd to the door. Beth gave a violent start. Cole! For the moment she had forgotten the scene in the bunkhouse. Now her heart turned over. The vicious foreman would have regained consciousness long since, gotten up from the floor with red murder in his eyes.

"For Gawd's sake git after him, Gannon!" the white-faced man was saying, his voice shrill with wild terror. "Yuh don't know Cole Mattson like I do! He'd kill me on sight now! Git me outer here—put me in the jail—"

The shrilling wretch never finished. A six-gun roared from somewhere outside, and the Border rat fell, blood welling from his throat.

A wild cry broke from Beth as she saw Don Gannon jerk a heavy Colt from his holster. She yelled at him, tried to grab him, but he seemed neither to see nor hear her. He plunged through the crowd and slammed out through the swinging doors. Excited, milling men jammed the doors to follow him.

For a split second only Beth stood there. She had seen the flash of the gun. It had come from a rear window, which, she knew, opened onto the narrow alleyway that ran alongside the building. Something told her that there was not a second to spare; the men milling to get out the front way might not heed her.

She whirled and darted for the window, whipping out her six-gun as she ran. She did not hesitate, did not crouch there to look out first. Like a flash of light she was over the sill and standing in the alley, her stark eyes trying to penetrate the shadows in which she stood. The lamplight from the front windows of the saloon revealed the street end of the alley clearly.

A horse snorted—she had almost dropped directly on it—and then she saw the unmistakable figure of the hulking foreman, flattened against the wall of the saloon. But even as

she glimpsed him, she saw Don Gannon coming down the alley. She saw Cole Mattson's gun come up for the kill.

"Don—*look out!*" she screamed. There was no time for her to use her own gun. Like some wild little animal she flung herself on the foreman and knocked up the deadly muzzle of the gun as he pressed the trigger. She heard him curse, and then he grabbed her and flung her away with such savage, brutal force that she sank panting and gasping to her hands and knees.

Vaguely she heard the waddy yelling something, but what he said was drowned in the roar of his heavy Colt. She could see Mattson with his gun in his hand, but suddenly he swayed, and sank to the ground. She did not know whether he had fired again. She dared not look.

And then someone was lifting her up, holding her in his arms. She found herself looking into Don Gannon's glowing eyes.

"I thought the skunk had hurt yuh, honey," he said thickly.

Beth clung to him, sobbing. "Oh, Don—I—thought he'd got you."

"I reckon he would have, if yuh hadn't knocked up his gun," said the waddy. He looked at the men crowding around. Beth stood back from him. Her eyes were wet, but her heart was singing. She smiled as she saw his hard grin return. He was looking at old Ben.

"I would've told yuh, Sheriff," he said, "that I'd seen them two crooks with Mattson several times recent, an' was kinda trailin' an' watchin' 'em. I would've told yuh tonight in the saloon, when I let yuh nab me an' shove me in yore jail, but I'm kind of a nut, I reckon. I like to work out them things they call theories. I was playin' this here theory about how if yuh give a crook rope enough, he'll kinda hang himself. Yuh see, I want to stay in these parts—for a certain reason—an' I brought my roll that I made sellin' a small spread of my own."

"Shut up an' git Beth outa this alley!" rasped old Ben.

GRINNING men slapped him on the shoulder as he and Beth walked up the alley and out to the street. Beth hurried on, heart beating fast. She did not seem to know that she *was* hurrying blindly and foolishly on up the street. She could think of only one thing. She had seen it in his eyes. He loved her.

"Wait a minute, honey," he said, taking her arm and stopping her. "Where do yuh think yuh're goin'?"

Beth looked up at him cautiously from under the brim of her oversize hat. Her tanned cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining. And then the hat tumbled to the trail as he caught her in his arms.

"Oh, Don!" she said. "Let's go home—just you and I!"

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Phantom of Gila Creek

Faith caught up Gregory's other weapon and joined in the battle

Faith Golding Finds Love in the Crucible of Range War, While Guns Roar and a Posse Rides!

By WALTER MARQUISS

Author of "A Game of Hearts," "Bury the Past," etc.

FAITH GOLDING was made of the stern, range-bred stuff that seldom melts in tears. But she was crying softly now as she stood on the bank peering down into the rushing water of Gila Creek. Downstream she heard the quiet roar of Gila Falls, once musical, but now a mocking, sinister sound that hurt her ears.

"This is where Slim fell," she said. "Ted Regan was back there among the rocks when he fired. Slim's body slid down into the creek, and—and over the falls. We haven't found it yet!"

Under the deep bronze and dust of hard travel, Chet Gregory's lean face looked white and set in the gathering dusk. There was a glint

of steel in his grey eyes, which squinted constantly from years of riding under the Texas sun. His voice was low and drawling, but there was a rasp in it.

"Slim was my friend," he said. "I come up here the minute I heard about it. And yuh kin depend on it, ma'am, I'll find the polecat that drygulched him if it takes forever!"

With creaking leather, they swung astride their horses again and headed back toward the low, rambling house at Sunrise Ranch, Faith's home. The full moon was rising as they topped a low ridge and eased down to cross a gentle swale. Dry-eyed now, Faith stole several glances at the grim profile of the man from Texas. She had known him less than an hour; but there was some strange quality about him that made the hour stretch out until its minutes were as months.

CHET GREGORY turned to look to her; and for a moment she fancied that there was more than sympathy in his softened expression. It was as if some inner fire had been suddenly kindled.

Faith was not the sort to spend much time in speculating upon her charms. Her mirror had told her, casually, that she was a pretty girl. But the glass had not revealed to her the subtle spirit that glowed through her violet eyes to kindle flame in masculine veins.

She had never learned that she was one of those rare feminine creatures for whom weak men will sully honor, and for whom strong men will fight and die; particularly in this wild new land, where fair-haired beauty such as hers was as scarce as the welcome rains in summer. She had loved but once. She did not know that she had *been* loved many times!

But whatever may have been in Gregory's mind, whatever his emotions, there was nothing personal in his words.

"Yuh say this here Doug Rains is comin' over tonight?"

"If he's in town," Faith said. "I sent a man for him. If he's over at the mine, he can't get here before morning."

As they rode on, silent, Faith's thoughts drifted back to the day when she had shyly announced her engagement to Slim Orrison, her foreman at Sunrise Ranch. It was the happiest day of her life—and the bleakest. For late in the afternoon she had heard those distant shots, like terse, clipped syllables of doom. And Doug Rains had come galloping to the house with the awful news that Slim had been killed by Ted Regan!

Her reminiscing thoughts broke off short as the horses swung up over the brow of another rise. Before them, an eighth of a mile away, lay the sprawling adobe buildings of the ranch. Below, where the winding alkali road was bright with moonlight, a half dozen forms milled madly about in a fog of dust. One voice rose in a wild cry for help. Instantly it was choked off.

Faith sensed the tension in Gregory's body as he reared rigid in the stirrups, staring. His voice snapped one startled word:

"Indians!"

Instantly he roweled his animal's flanks, swept down the slope with drumming hoofs, lead spewing from his blazing guns.

The forms in the road scattered. Orange flashes stabbed the night, the smacking blasts of six-guns filled the air. A slug pinged past Faith's ear like an angry hornet in a terrific rush. Unused to the sing of lead, the girl winced; but she did not falter. With the fine, sure courage of her kind, she spurred on at a gallop.

Gregory's horse bounded over the

ditch at the roadside, lunged at the embattled shadows. The Indians broke and fled, scattering among the head-high mesquite beyond the road. His guns smashing the stillness, Gregory followed. But the fugitives vanished beyond the inky brush. He wheeled and rode back, just as Faith sprang down into the road.

A stocky man was gathering himself out of the dust. He was breathing heavily with exertion and reaction from alarm. His black eyes flashed up to meet Faith's.

"Doug!" she cried. "Are you hurt?"

Rains shook his head. His hands explored his shaken body. Chet Gregory leaped down beside the girl.

"It's Doug Rains," she explained, and spoke Gregory's name in introduction.

The men's eyes met, and they shook hands. Rains muttered banal greeting.

"Curious," Gregory drawled. "I thought the Apaches were all mighty tame nowadays."

"They wasn't Indians," Rains broke in crisply. "They was Ted Regan, and part of the Millen gang, dressed up thataway!"

Rains' horse stood motionless several yards away, with his head down. Mounting, the three rode on toward the ranch, hoofs kicking up tiny explosions of dust. In the yard, they swung from saddles. Rains paused on the veranda to beat some of the dust from his clothes. Then he followed the others into the wide, beam-ceilinged living room.

Gregory stood in the middle of the floor, hands behind him, watching Rains and waiting. Rains' black eyes, smoldering, were intent on Faith.

"Yore man Buck says yuh want to see me, Faith," Rains said. "That's why I rode out."

"Mr. Gregory wants to talk to you," she answered. "He's an old friend of Slim's. He's come over from Texas to help track down Slim's murderer."

"That's fine!" Rains nodded vigorously. "I reckon yuh kin count on me, hombre. Because of poor Slim—and because all these raids have got the mine plumb near bankrupt!"

"Mine?" Gregory asked.

"Mr. Rains is superintendent of the Three-Nugget Gold Mine," Faith explained, "on the other side of Ragged Ridge."

"Yeah. I supposed yuh knew that."

"I don't know anything about this country up here," Gregory said, "'cept what Miss Goldin's told me. She says you and another ranny seen Slim bushwhacked."

RAINS nodded slowly. "Me and Bud Colby. But yuh won't git no talk out of poor Bud. Regan got him too, last night. Right through the back of his head."

"And this here Regan was out to finish yuh tonight?"

"Yeah. I reckon I'd of been lookin' up at the stars right now, and not seein' any, if you hadn't happened along. I'm plumb grateful, hombre. Regan's a renegade and a murderer, but he ain't no fool. With me and Bud both out of the way, there's no witnesses, and he kin quit hidin' out in the hills.

"The way it looks, Regan must be hooked up with Stacey Millen's gang that's been rustlin' cows and stealin' gold from Three-Nugget shipments for plumb near a year. He's slick, though, and nobody even guessed it till Slim stumbled on the hideout back in Ragged Mountain. Then Regan jest gunned Slim to keep his mouth shut."

"And you seen it? Yuh're shore it was Regan?"

"Yeah. I slapped some lead at the hombre—but he got away."

"And Regan pretended to be Slim's best friend!" Faith murmured. Her

voice throbbed with the bitterness that burned her soul.

They talked until late in the night. Gregory's terse questions brought out every phase of Rains' knowledge of the two murders. At last Gregory turned to the girl.

"Looks like a big day for me tomorrow," he said grimly. "I reckon I'd better git some shut-eye."

She showed him to a room in the west el. Gregory carried in his weighty saddlebags, and let them clatter on the floor. A smile softened his rugged features as he held her hand for a moment at good night and said earnestly:

"Don't yuh fret yoreself too much, ma'am. I'll find this here Ted Regan if I have to bust somethin'!"

Faith met his glance. Something in it produced a tiny seedling thrill, sprouting in the tips of her nerves, and spreading quickly through her. Faint warmth suffused her cheeks, and she looked away.

"I'm sure you will!" she answered softly. "Good night!"

Back in the living room, she found Rains standing in the middle of the floor, fingering his broad-rimmed Stetson.

"I reckon I better be gittin' back to town," he said, a little reluctantly.

"Will it be safe—"

"Shore. I'll sneak out the back way, and keep in the dark, so Regan can't see me if he's watchin'. Nothin's goin' to happen to me, honey. I got too much to live for!"

There was a gleam in his slightly narrowed eyes as he spoke. It was curiously fascinating; it made Faith think of a serpent and a bird. A chill slid up and down her back, and in that moment she missed Slim more than ever before—

IT WAS a taciturn, purposeful Chet Gregory who joined Faith at breakfast next morning. He spoke seldom, and only in monosyllables. But his grey eyes sought hers several times, and in them there seemed to be a message which she couldn't quite fathom.

She stood on the veranda, watching after him as he rode away toward Ragged Ridge, northeast of the range. Several of her punchers paused in their work about the corral to look at him as he passed. Then he was out of sight among the boulders and scrub oak that edged down to the rear of the ranchyard.

She wondered, pensively, why his coming had eased the pain of Slim's loss, and comforted her. She had known Chet Gregory only a few hours—in a way she didn't know him at all! And yet—

Well, he had been Slim's friend; she had been Slim's sweetheart. Was it sympathy born of their mutual loss that made them seem so close together?

Faith's mind accepted this explanation; but a subtle stirring in her breast insisted that it was something else, and deeper. Something that filled her with impatience for his return, and with fear for his safety when he did not come out of the darkly sinister hills that night, nor all of the next morning.

For a moment her hard young courage lagged. For a moment she hated this primitive, cruel range country, and what it did to a woman's right to happiness. It stole her loved ones and hardened her soul.

The West had killed Faith's father, the founder of Sunrise Ranch, more than a year ago. It had killed the man she had chosen to be her husband.

And now—

Had something, too, happened to this new man with the tawny hair and the sober grey eyes where lights and shadows came and went with a message which she could not understand?

The *clop* of approaching hoofs

swelled outside. Pulse quickening, Faith ran to a window and drew aside the curtains. Then she felt herself sag with disappointment. The man who was swinging down from his horse in the yard was not Gregory. He was Doug Rains. Faith let the curtain drop back in place and turned from the window.

Rains' heavy steps plumped on the veranda. His knock clattered on the door. Faith went over to admit him, with much less welcome than was normal to her friendly nature.

"Any news?" he asked brusquely.

Faith shook her head, and added, "I'm worried, Doug!"

"Yuh mean about him—this Gregory fella?"

When she nodded, he cleared his throat.

"Look here, Faith"—his tone sharpened—"yuh ain't fallin' in love with this ranny, are yuh?"

She glanced up quickly, surprised. "Why, of course not! I scarcely know him!" But warmth rose in her throat and cheeks.

"Because I *could* be jealous of him, savvy! I was jealous of Slim—only with Slim I couldn't do anything about it, because yuh was promised to him. But yuh ain't promised to Gregory—"

He stepped swiftly toward her. His heavy hands were on her shoulders, shaking her rhythmically back and forth.

"I want yuh for myself, honey!" he said, panting. "I want to marry yuh and take care of yuh! Long as Slim was around, I kept it hid, because I liked Slim. But now—"

He broke off. His arms swept out, snatched her tense, slender body tight against his broad chest. His hot, moist breath cloyed on her cheek as his thick lips groped for hers and found them.

The kiss seemed to sear her mouth. Violently she twisted her face aside, and pried herself back from his straining embrace. She retreated as his arms reached for her again.

Voice sharp with protest, she cried, "Don't!"

His hands dropped to his sides, heavily. For an instant his burning eyes swept her face. Then, breathing hard, he heeled about and stood looking out the window.

"I'm sorry, Faith. Reckon I sort of went off half-cocked. I know yuh must be missin' Slim yet, and I shouldn'ta tried to rush yuh. But—I love yuh—"

HE turned back, but checked himself when she put up one hand. He moved toward the door, picking up his Stetson.

"I'll come out agin in a day or two," he added hoarsely. "Mebbe yuh'll feel different."

She scarcely heard his steps clumping on the veranda, nor the *clopping* of hoofs as he rode away. For her mind had veered around again to a tawny-haired young man, and a pair of light-flecked grey eyes. Perhaps she should be ashamed of her emotions. Slim had been dead for less than a week; and now—

It was an hour or two later, though it seemed days, when hoofbeats again drew her to the window. This time her spirit soared, for the man just dismounting from the bald-faced roan in the yard was Chet Gregory.

Faith whirled and ran to the door, out upon the veranda. But as she sprang down the steps, she stopped dead in her tracks. Horror and dismay shrieked in her brain. She saw Gregory crumple beside his horse. Before his body struck the ground, she heard the vicious *whang* of a high-powered rifle back among the rocks!

"Chet!" Faith cried.

Her slender legs flashed in the afternoon sunlight as she ran toward his fallen form. She went down on

her knees beside him. Frantically she gathered his bleeding head into her arms. The crimson stained her white shirt. One hand groped against his breast, anxiously seeking the beat of his heart.

Beyond the corral the rifle smacked once more, and still again. It was echoed by the shorter, lustier roar of a Colt's .45. It was evident that two men were blazing away at each other among the trees and boulders. A half dozen of Faith's hands sprang to action, converged cautiously on the edge of the rocky terrain, guns ready.

Then a silence fell, intense after the furor.

A STOCKY man broke cover, hurrying toward the ranch buildings. A half dozen guns covered him, but held their fire when his hands rose to the level of his shoulders. He was Doug Rains.

Sure that he was recognized, Rains lowered his hands. He ran on, limping slightly, and stopped two or three yards from Faith as the punchers gathered around.

"It was Regan again!" he announced excitedly. "I almost got him—but he shot my hoss under me! Poor old Nugget! Right between the eyes!" He went down on one knee beside Faith, and squinted at Gregory's ash-grey face. "Dead?" he asked hoarsely.

"No, thank heavens!" Faith answered. "His heart's beating. Help me get him inside!"

Two of the men, Buck Owen and Spud Jones, sprang forward to do her bidding. Gently rough hands lifted Gregory's inert body, carried it across the veranda and into a bedroom, laid him on the bed.

"Some water!" Faith commanded. Buck Owen ran to obey.

She bent over Gregory, dry-eyed, but aching as if her heart had been crushed in her breast. Her fingers smoothed his brow and temple, and came away tainted with his blood.

"Chet!"

Then she saw that his eyes were open, looking up at her through a fog of pain. His lips moved, and curved in a twisted smile. Owen hurried back with a basin of water.

Moistening a cloth, she bathed away the ruddy smear on Gregory's temple and cheek. The bullet had only creased the scalp, above the left eye. A fraction of an inch to the left, it would have missed him. A fraction to the right—

She flinched at the thought, with her eyes momentarily closed; and she thanked God in the same breath. Steadying herself, she continued the task of bandaging the wound.

Gregory gazed up at her, his eyes thanking her. Again she sensed that unfathomable message. And this time she came nearer to understanding it than ever before!

Breathing more quickly, she glanced away, and caught Doug Rains' look upon her. Her nerves twitched, for the gleam in the black eyes compelled her to remember Rains' admitted jealousy. It told her that, no matter what they had in common in the task of tracking down the killer of their mutual friend, Rains and Gregory would be enemies because of her!

Turning back, she finished the bandaging. Then she smiled, a flash of sunlight over her clouded face. She did not know it, but in that moment there wasn't a lovelier girl in the world than Faith. A quick, sharp breath came from between Chet Gregory's teeth.

"Now you can talk," she said, low. "What happened? Did you find out anything?"

He tried to shake his head, but winced with the pain of the effort.

"No," he answered. "But I reckon this here Regan hombre must of seen me prowlin' around the hills. He

must of been afraid I *would* find out somethin'!"

His eyes turned away as he spoke, as if avoiding hers. It gave an impression that he was evading the truth. But this impression she drove fiercely away. She trusted him implicitly; trusted him more than any man since Slim—

Boards creaked behind her as Rains stalked out of the room. In a moment more she heard the thud of his feet on the veranda, and the restless beat of hoofs as he rode away.

Then she forgot Rains, for Gregory's grey eyes were on her face again, commanding hers with those alluring points of light. He reached a hand toward her, but drew it back.

"I'm gonna hate it," he said quietly, "when this here business is finished up, and I have to go away agin!"

A lump rose in her throat. She had to moisten her suddenly dry lips.

"Do you—do you *have* to go away?" she breathed.

His gaze lifted to the ceiling and filled with a kind of far-set look. His lips twitched, and set with an expression that was like regret.

"I'm afraid I do, ma'am!" he said—

Chet Gregory's was the kind of iron constitution that scorns all wounds that are short of fatal. The next day he was astir early, preparing to ride again. Faith leaned toward him as they ate their breakfast bacon, with a feeling of anxiety such as she had seldom known before.

"You will be careful, won't you?"

The glow in his eyes burned brighter for an instant, then died. Rising abruptly, he took up his high-crowned, tawny Stetson and buckled on his belt, strapping the low-swinging holsters to his thighs.

"Shore I will, ma'am," he answered. The steel was in his eyes. He did not smile.

As before, she watched him as he cantered out past the corral, and vanished among the cluttered boulders. She had a strange, painful sense of heaviness, of foreboding, as she went back into the house.

The day dragged itself out, and once more night crept over the hills and the range, painting its weird pictures upon the landscape. Dread increased as the hours loafed by. The suspense of waiting became an agony. Faith felt stifled in the house, starved for action of any kind. She would have given half her soul to be up in the hills, sharing with Gregory any and all of the dangers that might beset him.

UNABLE to endure it any longer, she slipped out through the rear door and walked rapidly down toward Gila Creek. On the bank she stood for minutes, staring down into the water.

All at once a slithering sound of stealthy movement made her whirl in her tracks. Her lips parted to scream for help as a dark form lunged toward her. But before a sound came, a strong, rough hand clapped over her mouth. Burning eyes stared down into hers through slits in a black mask.

Struggling, Faith was lifted by powerful arms, borne into a clump of scrub trees that grew in the rocky ground on the creek bank. A horse waited there. Her captor lifted her as though she were a child, sprang into the saddle, holding her tight against his chest. Faith screamed with all the force of her lungs, but again the rough hand covered her mouth.

Instantly the horse was off at a long, easy lope toward the raw peaks of Ragged Ridge, which stood out like half decayed teeth against the light of the climbing moon.

Faith ceased her struggles finally. She did not try to scream again. The man was far too strong for her, and she only wasted her energy. She relaxed, but with the utmost mental alertness. This vigilance, too, proved futile.

Not for an instant was he to be caught off guard. To her demand to know where he was taking her, he answered only with a shrug.

He rode on, silent, for long, dread-filled minutes. A few miles back in the foothills he suddenly swung the horse's head to the right. Picking its way on sure feet, the animal plunged into a dark, narrow canyon, following the course of upper Gila Creek.

Despite the darkness, Faith knew where they were. A mile up this creek was a small clearing, centered by the sagging old cabin of an abandoned mine working. It was obvious that her captor was taking her there—and in that thought was despair. Not once in weeks did any one stray into this tortuous, difficult aisle of rock and brush!

Incredulous thoughts buzzed in her mind. Her memory swam with Doug Rains' jealous outburst, the baleful glint in his black eyes. It was unbelievable, but what else could she think? Rains, maddened by desire, had hired this man to kidnap her, and hold her here until—

THE horse stopped before the black bulk of the old mine shack. As her captor alighted, Faith made a desperate attempt to break away. His arms flashed about her shoulders and knees. With scarcely any effort, he carried her through the low door, kicking it shut behind him. He set her on her feet, and moved away. Faith's eyes strained in the darkness, seeking her bearings for a dash to the door.

But before she could move, a voice sounded out of the dark—a voice she had never expected to hear again. A match flared and touched a candle wick. The light revealed a lean, tanned face which she had believed gone forever!

"I hated to do it, honey. But it was the only way—"

"Slim!" she screamed, all but stunned by the rush of joy at seeing him alive.

Then there was nothing but the fact that he *was* alive. Alive and well! In a flash she ran to him, snuggled in his arms, letting her head droop against his broad shoulder.

"Slim!"

But even in the vast sweep of her gladness, even when she felt his strong, hard body pressing her close, the face of another man seemed to rise nebulously in her vision. She drew back a little, shaken by a new quandary. And for the first time she found herself wondering about her real feeling for Slim, comparing it with the insidious, commanding emotion aroused by thoughts of Chet Gregory.

"Slim!" she said. "Why didn't you tell me you were alive? Oh, it was cruel! To let me go on thinking—"

Slow red tinged his cheeks under the tan.

"Yeah, I reckon it was, honey. But I figgered I'd better jest let ever'body think I was done for. Because, yuh see, I figgered I knowed who killed Ted, and—"

"Ted? You mean Ted Regan?"

"Yeah. Dead. Doug Rains shot 'im in the back. Tried to git me, too."

"Rains? Oh, no, Slim!" It was too incredible!

Slim nodded solemnly, and glanced aside. Then, for the first time, Faith noticed the overalled man who crouched in a corner, helplessly bound, and gagged with a large red bandanna.

"But how do you know it was Rains?"

Slim shrugged.

"I didn't know it then, for shore. But I figgered it musta been, because me and Ted stumbled onto him with a cache of gold dust back here in the hills. That made it look like Rains was the hombre that was robbin' the Three-Nugget mine shipments, which he's been squawkin' about. He musta seen us and follered, for next thing we know he's blazin' away at us. Or somebody is. Ted went over in the crick, and I reckon his body was all ground to pieces on the rocks under the falls. The same thing woulda happened to me, too, only I was jest stunned, and caught onto some bushes, and clumb out. Then I figgered if Rains, or whoever it was, wanted me dead so bad, I'd jest let him go on thinkin' he got me—till I could prove what I felt was shore 'nough gospel!"

"But—but Rains told me he saw Ted Regan kill you! He and Bud Colby!"

"Yeah. I run into Chet Gregory camped up in the hills yesterday mornin'—first I knowed he'd left Texas. He told me what Rains claimed happened."

Again Slim glanced at the trussed-up man in the corner. He went over and prodded the prisoner with a distasteful boot.

"But my friend Pete here told me different, after I captured him! Didn't yuh, Pete!" The man's eyes glared. "It took quite a bit of persuadin', but finally Pete come through with the truth. Besides robbin' his own mine, Rains is one of the Millen gang of rustlers. Rains did kill Ted, and thought he killed me. And Rains plugged Bud Colby in the back, because Colby knowed too much. Then, to make it look like Ted was after him, too, he had Stacey Millen jump him down by the ranch—"

"And Chet? It was Rains who shot at Chet?"

"Yuh guessed it right off. Then pumped a scad of lead in the air, and killed his hoss. Kin yuh figger a crawlin' lizard that'll shoot his own hoss, jest to prove a lie?"

Another startled thought made Faith catch her breath. Rains had another motive, too, which Slim had not mentioned. Jealousy! Rains would be glad to have Slim—and Chet Gregory, too, safely out of his path!

"Slim!" she said suddenly. "Why did you kidnap me?"

SLIM ignored the question, but went on:

"So Chet and me, we got our heads together. This here Millen gang holes up back in the hills, where the goin's tough, and a lot of good, hard-ridin' buckaroos is gonna git hurt if a posse busts in after 'em. So we figgered out a way to drag 'em out in the open. Chet gits Rains aside and plants the idee, confidential, that he's gonna meet Pete here, and Pete's gonna lead him to the hideout. Rains gits scared, and high-tails it for the hills, pertendin' he's goin' over to the Three-Nugget—"

"Why did you kidnap me?" Faith repeated sharply.

"Because," Slim answered doggedly, "there's gonna be plenty excitement down at yore ranch in a hour or two, when the Millen gang shows up to head Chet off—and finds the sheriff's posse layin' for 'em! And yuh might git hurt. I knowed yuh wouldn't leave if I jest ast yuh to—"

"I certainly wouldn't! And I'm not going to stay!"

"Yuh're a brave girl, honey," Slim broke in gently. "Too brave for yore own good. Yuh're gonna stay, because I'm gonna lock yuh in till it's over!"

As he spoke, Slim turned to bend

over the man Pete, to make sure of the bonds. When he straightened up, he yelled. For Faith, seizing the moment's advantage, was just darting through the door.

Outside, Slim yelled again. Faith crouched low behind a clump of brush, trying to control the noisy beat of her heart. She heard Slim curse under his breath as he came toward her, peering about. Then his high-heeled boots clattered on rock as he ran for his horse. Calling her name, he rode down the canyon.

CAUTIOUSLY, Faith stood erect and faced the canyon wall. Before her a narrow arroyo wound down from the mesa above. It was steep, and strewn with briars and rocks, lined with holes to trip unwary feet. Climbing upward through it was a task which seemed hours long.

Thorns and jagged points clutched at her like talons, bruising her hands, scratching her legs, tearing her clothes to shreds. The demon of black night leered at her. But at last she came out in the lesser gloom on level ground.

Steering a course by keeping the moon well over her right shoulder, she hurried over the mesa toward the ranch. A mile, two miles, stumbling and catching herself, plunging on. She arrived at last on the brow of the bluff overlooking Gila Creek and the sprawling ranch buildings beyond.

Vicious sounds leaped up at her from below. The slap and chop and bang of firearms shattered the night. Hot streaks of orange light made jagged splinters in the dark. Sheriff Jenkins' men had closed in on the raiding bandits, just as planned!

She hesitated for only a moment on the brink, then lunged down the steep slope. On stepping stones behind the ranch, she bridged the creek. She hurried on past the corral. She winced, and dodged when a bullet ploughed dirt almost at her feet, and again when another screamed as it ricocheted over her head.

But she did not falter. Regardless of the metal hail, she ran to the ranchhouse. Courage staunch in her heart, she stole along the wall to the corner, and peered around it. Her pulse leaped, she all but cried out.

Twenty feet away, face gaunt and white in the moonlight, Chet Gregory crouched behind a wide rain-barrel. Two noisy guns were pushing lead at the milling mob of shadows in the yard. Slugs thudded and slatted against the barrel. Its side spewed water like a sieve.

A sound like a dull drum-beat slapped her ears. A cry broke from her lips as Chet Gregory grunted loudly, and whirled half around to the left. The gun clattered from his left hand. Heedless of everything except Gregory, Faith broke cover and ran toward him. Miraculously she escaped the lethal rain which poured about her. She plunged down beside the cowboy, behind his rain-barrel fort. Blood smeared the left shoulder and sleeve of his shirt.

He gave her one sharp, startled look.

"Faith!" he yelped. "My Gawd!" The fingers of his right hand dropped his remaining gun, and gripped her shoulder, bruising the flesh. "Git down!"

A gigantic shadow came tearing toward him, to take advantage of the momentary lull. Gregory snatched up the right-hand gun again, fanning the hammer as rapidly as he could aim. The charging shadow leaped, squealing, and dropped on buckling knees, lay still. Breathing hard, Faith caught up Gregory's other weapon, joined in the battle.

Somewhere a man yelled a wild curse. Another screamed with

gurgling agony. The spat, slap, bang of pistol and rifle churned the night to bedlam.

There was an instant of quiet, and then the noise of shots broke out again, more furiously. It was like the final desperate spurt of a midsummer storm. Then, suddenly, the bandits gave ground. Panic seemed to seize all of them at once.

But one detachment of the posse had worked around to the rear of the yard, cutting off the way of retreat into the rocks and scrub oaks.

A voice rang out in sharp command. Faith recognized the voice of Sheriff Jenkins. Then, one by one, the bandits dropped their guns, and arms went up. The battle of Sunrise Ranch was over. The once formidable Millen gang was only a clot of disconcerted, frightened men. A round half dozen were past all dread. And one of these was Stacey Millen.

In the midst of the living and dead, one stocky man stood whimpering with fear, his face pasty in the moonlight. Faith recognized Doug Rains.

She heard a low, gasping moan beside her. Whirling, she was just in time to see Gregory wilt down on his face—

"SEEMS that bullets can't do much harm to you, Mister," Faith said, smiling at Gregory later, after the doctor had come and gone. "But you heard the orders! You stay in bed! You can't go back to Texas—for a while at least!"

"Yuh sound like yuh don't want me to go at all!"

"Oh, Chet, you know I don't!" She bit hard on her lower lip, for even the thought of his leaving tortured her.

He gathered her small hand in his muscular, large ones.

"What about Slim, Faith?" he asked.

Before she could reply, the door popped open. It was Slim himself who burst in, talking loudly as he came.

"Waal, it's all over! Rains has confessed the whole thing and we'll—"

His voice stopped as though something had chopped it off. He stared at Faith's white face, then shifted his gaze to the clasped hands. His tongue pushed outward against his lower lip.

"Slim—" Faith faltered. Her eyes smarted with warm moisture. His gaze, sombre now, was intent upon her.

"Yuh love him, huh?"

Faith nodded, and looked away. Gregory heaved upward on the cot, thrust one leg over the edge.

"I'm sorry, Slim—" he began hoarsely.

Something in Slim's expression checked him. Faith held her breath as Slim's fingers curled near the walnut stock of his holstered gun. Then the hand slid deep into the pocket of his overalls.

"Yuh're a liar!" Slim said heavily. "Yuh ain't sorry, yuh durned sidewinder! Yuh're glad! If yuh ain't, then yuh're a fool, because yuh oughta be!"

He turned abruptly. For a moment he stood looking at Faith. Pain burned in his half closed eyes. His look sought Gregory again. He grinned wryly.

"That there job yuh left down in Texas," he said. "I reckon it 'ud fit me jest as well, huh?"

Before either Faith or Gregory could speak, Slim strode to the door, and out. Faith stared after him for a long moment. Then she sank slowly to the edge of the cot.

Through the haze of her sympathetic tears, she saw Gregory's arms reach toward her. And then Slim was forgotten in the living ecstasy of Chet Gregory's first kiss.

Branding Fire Song Book

By "TEX" BROWN

WELL, rannies, here's the old howl again. Every time a cowpoke gets a minute to breathe he seems to start howling about how hard his life is and how tough the going is.

But even in the same breath he'll swear that he wouldn't be doing nothing else if he could. He usually can't do nothing else, anyway. After all, they don't ride horses back of ribbon counters nor at office desks neither, and riding horses is about all he knows. If you asked him to pass you the salt and pepper he'd try to figger some way of using his horse to do it.

He Yowls and Yaps About Everything

But still and all that don't keep him from squawking about how hard his life is, so I've got an idea that he puts up his yelp just for the sake of exercising his lungs. He can—and does—yowl and yap about everything, but try to get him to change his business and see how far you get. Or try to criticize the very things that he yaps about and watch how quick he starts defending them. Ask him how he'd like to quit punchin' cows and go to herding sheep, for instance, if he don't like cowpunching.

You'll get the answer pronto. And if you'll notice right closely, you'll see in this song that at the same time that he is squawking he's trying to wish the same fate as his own on some nice gal. He wants her to come on over and help him chase the rats and the coyotes away, I reckon.

But, all kidding aside, if there wasn't folks that took up those claims and women that was willing to marry and go live in them sod shanties which we usually call adobes because it sounds more romantic, I reckon there wouldn't have been no West with a capital W.

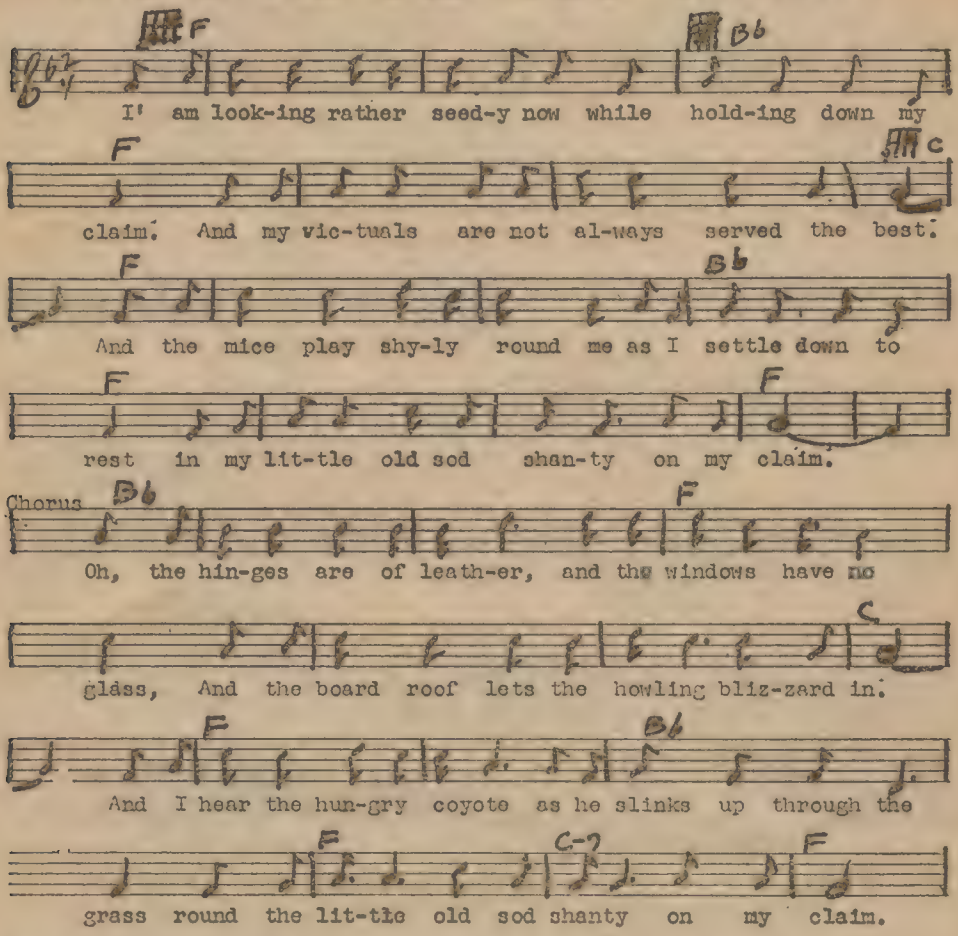
So even if we do kid them a little bit we still got to honor and respect them that did go through them hardships and build up the country.

And even more, we've got to respect the women that went out and married them cowpokes and moved into the little sod shanties. They was the ones that really had a legitimate right to put up a howl.

My Grandmaw Sure Kept Busy

I remember my grandmaw who come to Texas in a covered wagon and lived in a sod shanty while my grandpaw got his start. She couldn't even wash clothes without having to make the soap. He had to shoot a steer or a bear and she would rend the fat, and then drip water through ashes to get lye and then boil up the fat and lye together to make soap before she could wash the clothes. And everything else was just as primitive. You couldn't go down to the store and buy what you wanted there in them days because the nearest store was probably five hundred miles away. But she managed to bring up a family in that old sod shanty we're singing about today. So, here's the old-time song celebrating it. Maybe you'll remember hearing half a dozen versions sung to the same tune. One of them is a mighty popular religious song. Everybody west of the Mississippi River learns it when he's a kid. So grease up the old coyote howls and let her roar.

THE LITTLE OLD SOD SHANTY



My clothes are plastered o'er with mud, I'm looking like a fright,
And everything is scattered around the room,
Still I wouldn't give the freedom that I have out in the West
For all the comfort of the Eastern man's old home.

Chorus

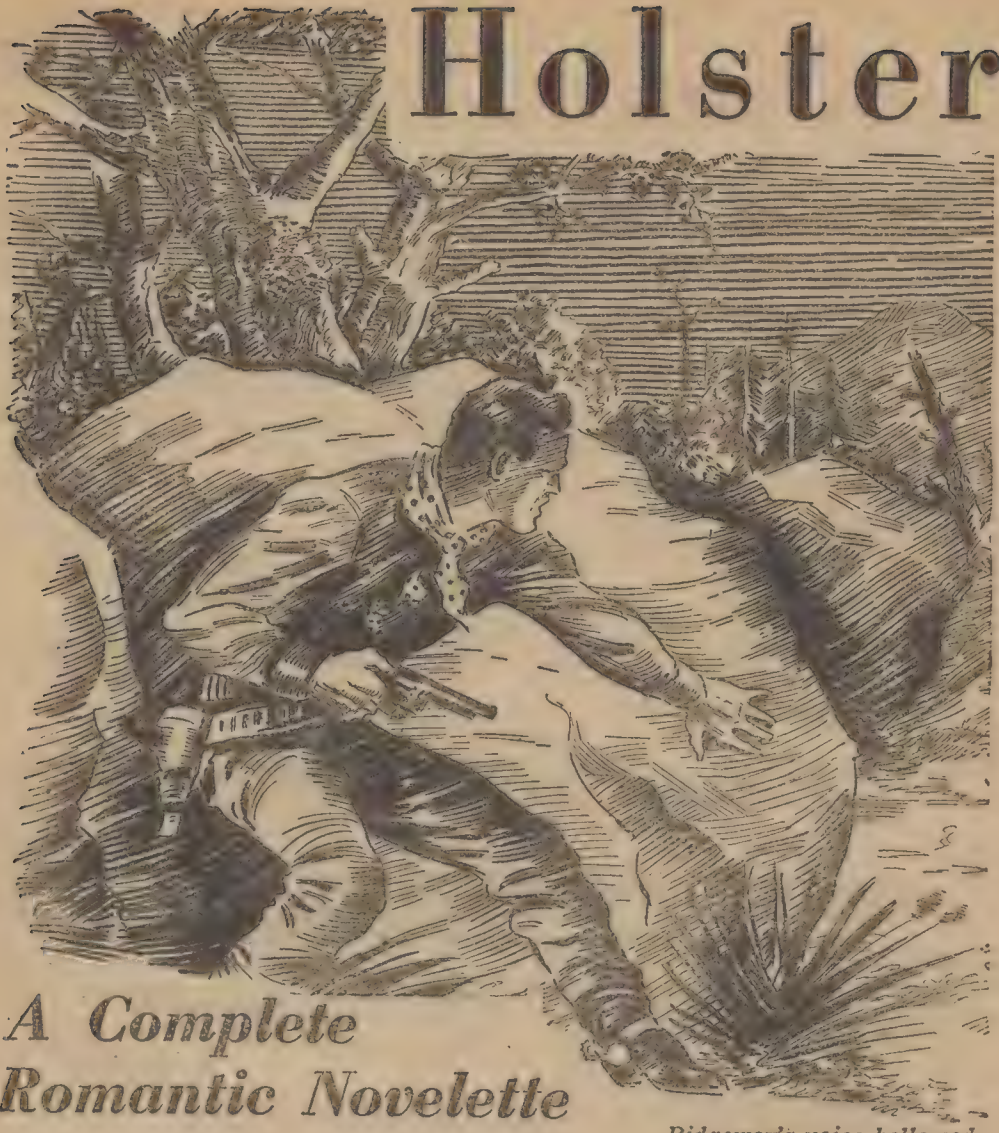
Still I wish some kind-hearted girl would pity on me take,
And relieve me from the mess that I am in.
The angel, how I'd bless her if this her home she'd make
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

We would make our fortunes on the prairies of the West,
Just as happy as two lovers we'd remain.
We'd forget the trials and troubles we endured at the first
In the little old sod shanty on our claim.

Chorus

Oh, the hinges are of leather, and the windows have no glass,
And the board roof lets the howling blizzard in,
And I hear the hungry coyote as he slinks up through the grass,
Round the little old sod shanty on my claim.

Holster



A Complete Romantic Novelette

Ridgeway's voice bellowed,

CHAPTER I

Serenade in Steel

A RIFLE popped a warning over the heads of the invaders. Little, milky-eyed Flack flung his hand upward, to halt his ten thousand cattle strung out for more than a mile behind. There in the low pass lay the sullen rifles of the little ranchers of Old Lonesome valley. Flack had to take his cattle through that pass. They had been without water for two days.

"Hey, Tygart, here's yore job," he shouted to a rider on the left point of the herd.

Rangy, quiet-mannered Bret Tygart pushed his grulla horse over to the cattle king.

A Range Girl Bucks Lynch Law for

Hurricane

"Don't shoot or you'll kill her"

By
CLEE WOODS
Author of "Cowboy's Lance," "Twin Trails to Romance," etc.

"Go up there and pow-wow with 'em, Tygart," Flack ordered. "Git into a fist-fight with their leader, or somebody, and let on like they knock yuh out cold. Then lay there and listen to find out which men we got to kill in order to send the rest hightailin' it outa my road."

Tygart's cool, grey eyes bespoke displeasure. The cowboy was beginning to realize what a ruthless invader Flack really was.

"I'd ruther not turn spy, Mr. Flack," he declared flatly.

Flack gave a grunt of amazement. He ran his filmy eyes over the cowboy in shrewd appraisal.

"Didn't yuh tell me when I hired yuh two weeks ago," Flack growled maliciously, "that yuh had a grudge

the Love of a Ranny On the Prod

to settle with Old Lonesome people?"

"Yeah, I did. I still do. If yuh want to know the truth, Loyd Marberry held me, jest a kid of eleven years, while they swung my Dad and uncle. I told 'em then I'd come back some day—to give 'em some of the same gruel. There's only four of 'em left: Marberry and his dad, Rip McKnight and Grizzly Johnson."

"Well," Flack sneered, thin lips snapping like a turtle's beak, "if yuh ain't got the guts to go, I'll git me a *man* for the job!"

Shem Ridgeway was within hearing. "I'll go, boss," he volunteered.

Ridgeway was sour because Flack had named Tygart foreman, and not him. He was one of three picked gun-slingers whom Flack called the "Drillers."

"I'll go over and talk to 'em, but in my own way," Bret Tygart said, completely ignoring Ridgeway.

FLACK nodded as Tygart rode up into the gap where the Old Lonesome rifles were concentrated. Back of one rifle was the slim, pretty face of Jennie McKnight. The sun glinted off her auburn hair. Her lustrous dark eyes betrayed both distress and defiance. Tygart had danced with her only last night in town; but she had not known then that he was foreman for the hated Flack, or that he meant to kill her father and three more men.

"Hombre," her father was challenging Tygart, "stop right where yuh are."

Red-headed Rip McKnight was leader of the Old Lonesome forces. "Grizzly" Johnson, his solid son-in-law who trapped bears in off seasons, backed him as the only six-gun expert of the entire valley force.

"I come to see," Bret announced, "if we can't compromise on this thing."

Strange talk from a man who had come back to Old Lonesome valley to kill the four survivors of his father's lynchers. But something had happened to Bret Tygart. Happened while Jennie McKnight danced in his arms.

On the left of McKnight lay handsome Loyd Marberry, clever cowboy gambler. He had a black eye and a swollen nose.

"Yuh settle with me first," Marberry hurled at Tygart. "This time with hardware!"

Marberry stepped out to face Tygart at ten yards. His fingers were on the handle of his gun.

Tygart flushed under the angry words. Last night Bret had lost his head and kissed Jennie out in the moonlight in the big patio. Marberry, who was eavesdropping, had rushed jealously out from his hiding place — and promptly got whipped.

And now Marberry had lost all reason in his fear and jealousy of Bret. Both Jennie and her father came running out. Grizzly Johnson pushed Marberry back with one hand. But Tygart was willing to let his vengeance wait. A girl's pair of dark eyes were on him, almost pleading for him not to go for a gun.

"I know who yuh are, Tygart," Johnson proclaimed. "For that reason, I'll give yuh just ten seconds to turn tail and hit back for yore outfit."

"If I go back," Bret answered, voice grave, "it'll mean a reg'lar hell on hoofs around here. Yuh little ranchers ain't no match for Flack's gun-slingers. I've jest found out the last three days that half of Flack's twenty-odd riders are cash killers."

Tygart had begun to loathe the Flack riders. In fact, as he got to know them better, thoughts of fighting with them so that he might gain private revenge, grew more and more repellent to him. It was queer that Flack had picked so young a man to be foreman over his hard crew. But Bret was that kind—born to inspire

any man's confidence, out where life runs raw.

"He's tryin' to scare us!" Marberry broke in, jumping out of McKnight's reach. "Here's the way I scare!"

His six-shooter flashed into the sunlight. Tygart had to fight, regardless of the bedlam of flaming guns his Colt would invite. His six-shooter whipped upward. But just then, Jennie McKnight threw her full weight against Marberry and knocked him onto hands and knees. Marberry's gun plowed a bullet into the ground as Tygart caught the squeeze of his trigger barely in time.

"Thank yuh, Miss Jennie, a heap," he said. "All these folks better think twice 'fore shootin' ary a shot. Flack got his rights here when he bought all that land."

"He bought only three sections," Rip McKnight argued hotly. "We've heard he shoots his way in once he gits a toe-hold. But he won't this time."

FLACK'S herd was growing by the minute as the cattle pushed up from behind. The cattle had caught the smell of water through the pass, and they would be hard to hold, even if Flack decided to halt.

But neither Jennie's swift interference nor Tygart's willingness to hold his fire saved the situation. Marberry's one shot gave excuse for one from Flack's side of the pass. The smoke lifted from a rifle muzzle just above the spot where Tygart had left Flack and Ridgeway. The target had been caught standing still. McKnight toppled to the ground. Tygart never forgot Jennie's anguished cry, nor the look of infinite hate and loathing she gave him as she fell down beside her father.

"Hey, men," Marberry cried to the Old Lonesome defenders, "this Tygart came over here jest to draw Rip out into the open for that shot. Boys, let's swing 'im! Tygart, up with yore hands!"

One shot into Tygart's body would set the Flack guns to barking their retaliation, and Grizzly Johnson and others of the valley men would certainly open fire if Tygart tried to escape. But surrender might mean his death. Jennie left her father and came toward Bret.

"Grizzly, kill him," she told her brother-in-law, "if he makes one move to run. Tygart, give me your guns."

Tygart hesitated. He certainly could not rely on mercy from the Old Lonesome people, and it was galling to have Grizzly Johnson called upon to keep him docile. Notwithstanding all this, a different anger had begun to swell in Tygart's heart. Rip McKnight had been shot down in cold blood. Tygart did not fight that way. At this moment, he knew that he was through with Flack.

"Jennie," he tried to break the terrible tension, "I hate it powerful bad about that shot."

"Think we'll swallow that?" the girl exclaimed. "Not as long as we know what kind of rattlesnakes Flack hires. Or that you came back to murder the men who hanged your horse-thief daddy. Climb down, hands away from guns, too."

Tygart had to make his decision. It was a tense moment, and a bitter one too, with words like that from her. She had evidently been told things since last night.

"Girl," Bret spoke to Jennie only, "my Dad was no horse thief. It was old hates and hot tempers then, same as now."

"Cowboy, I said 'light'," Jennie repeated her order, ignoring his argument.

It seemed as if she were pleading with Tygart to give in, and thus avert the bloody battle. He had a sudden impulse to trust himself to the girl's innate fairness. She was

bitterly against him now, but she would be fair enough to listen to his explanations. That thought cast the weight of his reasoning in favor of surrender. He alighted, and let the girl take his guns.

Just then, however, preconceived plans were touched off by the excitement and impatience of the Old Lonesome force. A young cowboy had been holding a black horse up behind a room-sized rock. Now he showed himself.

"Fellers, it's time for this—and watch 'em go!" he announced in a loud voice.

He swung onto his brown saddle-horse and whacked the black pony off through the low gap, straight toward Flack's party. When he got the black going well, the boy threw a white bundle out after it. It was a new bed tarp, tied to a rope, and the rope was tied to the saddle-horn of the loose black.

THE white tarp spread out, began flagging in the air. The black burst into a runaway. Flack, realizing that the trick was designed to stampede his cattle back the other way, bellowed orders. His men rushed out to turn the horse back.

Four Old Lonesome guns spat out lead to turn or kill the Flack riders. Two of the Flack men did whirl back. Two paid gun-fighters, however, rushed on out to turn the black horse.

Marberry took the quickest means of disposing of Tygart without shooting him in unpardonable cold blood. He ran up, slapped the side of his Colt against Tygart's head, knocking the cowboy to his knees, and hit him with his fist. Tygart fell, eyes glassy. He lay there, but he still was not quite bereft of his senses. All the Old Lonesome men began a terrific cracking of guns.

Jennie gathered her slight-framed father up into her arms. Frail as she was, she had to try to carry McKnight back out of the zone of war.

At the same time, the two Flack gun-fighters got the black pony turned up the slope. Then abruptly it wheeled down the pass. Men tried vainly to head it, then to shoot it. Wounded and terrified, the horse cut down onto the Flack herd. A wild-eyed old cow snorted and broke into a run, taking three or four thousand with her! There they came, thundering through the pass. Men cried frantically to Jennie to follow them in the human stampede for higher ground among the rocks.

Terror in her eyes, Jennie saw the wall of red and white bearing toward her. Marberry bent his course of flight her way. The cattle were only a hundred yards away.

"Jennie," Marberry shrieked, "Rip's dead. Drop 'im and come on!"

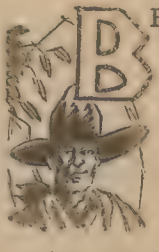
"Can't leave 'im—to be trampled!" she cried. "You get Tygart. Look, he'll—be run over!"

"Let 'em cut 'im to pulp. I'm takin' *you!*"

This time he used sheer brute force to tear Rip McKnight from the daughter's arms. Then he snatched her into his arms and made for three large rocks on the slope. Jennie screamed her protest and tried to fight loose, but Marberry bore her on.

CHAPTER II

Ranny on the Prod



BRET had been lying low, measuring the precious seconds in which he might fake insensibility until his enemies got far enough away so that he could make a break. He would have to run like a madman when he did start. Even had he been able to split the herd without a gun, he would have been left at the mercy of his enemies when the last cattle rushed past. He

would have to make for the rocks, where he could keep going under partial cover at least.

But Jennie's cries told him of the fate to which Marberry was leaving Rip McKnight. Tygart raced over, gathered the unconscious McKnight up, and made for the steep slope. But he ran so slowly, compared to the seething wall rushing hard for him. He could never get out of the cattle's path. He was seized by the mad impulse to drop McKnight and run for his life. What a mocking turn of fate that demanded he save McKnight's life, not take it! That was what he had to do. McKnight was Jennie's father, and a helpless man. Tygart could not leave him. The only thing he could do then, was to try to split the herd.

HE wheeled away from the cattle, raced for a boulder. Made it and propped McKnight in behind it. The cattle were almost upon them. Tygart sprang upon the rock and beat the air with his hat; his heart was in his throat. But he yelled frenziedly and waved his hat at the terrified brutes. And split them!

They poured around him on both sides. Tygart kept yelling and slashing with his hat, to keep the gap open. The thunder of hoofs drowned the shouts of the Old Lonesome people. One of them had not reached safe ground. That was old Harry Marberry, Loyd's father. The aging man had fallen, was trampled upon. Ignorant of this, Loyd lifted his voice above the din of the stampede.

"Folks, look! Tygart has captured Rip. He means to take 'im back for the Flack gang to hang, out of revenge. Let's mow him down the minute the cattle are past, or cut loose right now!"

That was a plausible excuse to kill Tygart. It had become an obsession with Marberry to kill Tygart, regardless of what else he did. Marberry followed his words with a shot at Tygart's exposed head and shoulders. Tygart had to leap down and crouch below the backs of the cattle. The mad cattle might close in, crush him down and churn him to death. He fought at the onrushing faces more frantically than ever.

The gap stayed open. The last drags thundered by. For a moment Tygart was left in a fog of dust. He could hear Marberry shouting still greater exhortations at his people, now in contradiction to his avowal that McKnight was dead.

"Come on, let's save old Rip—kill Tygart!"

Tygart could hear him running his way, through the dust. Marberry would expect him to retreat toward Flack's outfit. Tygart, to fool him, ran toward Marberry. Sighting the man through the dust-cloud, Tygart darted hard for him. Marberry was taken by utter surprise. Tygart was upon him before he could swing his pistol into action. He cracked his right fist at Marberry's jaw and slapped the man's gun hand aside with his left.

Young Marberry ducked down and Tygart got him on the lips. It took a second jolt to the jaw to send Marberry sprawling. Tygart tore his pistol from his hand. Marberry tried to get up. Tygart let him have another hefty right. Marberry was flattened; his huge mouth hung open, heavy lips already swollen from Tygart's first blow.

Tygart whirled in the direction of growing cries. There was Jennie trying to hold back half a dozen men. More were rushing up.

"Listen everybody!" the girl was crying. "Bret saved papa's life, he wasn't carrying him off. Be fair—let him go!"

But no argument would stop the onrushing men until it was too late for them to realize how Marberry had turned the gallant rescue of McKnight squarely against the rescuer.

'Look," Johnson cried, "Tygart

has killed Loyd too. Let 'im have it, boys!"

Tygart knew they would let him have it the next instant. He had a gun now. But to stand and fight with it would merely be a question of how many he could kill with the gun before they cut him into the dust. Also, bullets might fly so thick that Jennie would be hit. Tygart took to his heels. He stayed in the dust as long as he could, then headed for the rocky side of the pass. Flack did not know of Tygart's intent to quit him, and it was rather ironic that a dozen of the invaders opened fire on the valley people to protect Tygart. The fusillade put the Old Lonesome men to cover fast; Tygart was able to reach the rugged rocks higher up.

For Tygart to have shouted to Flack that he was through working for him, would have made the Old Lonesome men think that he was up to further trickery. There was a more positive way. Loyd Marberry was back with his crowd, and was still urging them to keep after Tygart until he was destroyed.

"Marberry," Tygart called, "ef yuh're halfway honest in yore claims, I'd like for yuh to go with me to Flack and hear me tell 'im that I'm through with him."

"Powerful quick change of heart," Marberry retorted, wholly unconvinced. "I suppose yuh'll want to be taken in on our side next—a good spy trick for Flack and a perfect chance for yuh to murder more of us."

"Naw, I'll settle my own accounts plumb in the open. Right now I jest want the Old Lonesome people to know I ain't doin' my fightin' Flack's way."

"Yuh jest want to play up to one of the Old Lonesome girls!" Marberry flared back. "Or mebbe it's a trick to capture me, so the Old Lonesome folks'll have to fight without me."

Marberry was still moved by jealousy and hate, not by cool appraisal of men and motives. But he seemed to have usurped the leadership of the valley men, now that McKnight was so near death that Jennie would not leave him. He led a sniping foray against Tygart. Rather than fight back, Tygart dodged and ran up the mountainside, from rock to brush and cliff. Only growing dusk allowed him complete escape. He stayed on the rimrocks until he located a small fire in the head of a gulch. That would be Flack's camp, hid away from Old Lonesome eyes. Tygart made for it.

A GUARD halted him, but when Tygart explained the situation, he was admitted to camp.

"Flack, I'd like to have my wages," Bret announced.

Flack's colorless eyes blinked in spite of his cold-bloodedness. Shem Ridgeway stepped out into the circle about the fire. With him were the two other Drillers, the much-feared gun-slingers.

"It's the gal," Ridgeway charged. "Don't know as I blame yuh, though. She's purty as a speckled pup."

"Yuh goin' over to her side?" Flack fired at Tygart.

"They don't want me. I'm quittin' because yuh lied to me, Flack. Yuh told me yuh'd bought half the Old Lonesome range. I hear yuh really got only three sections."

"It makes no difference how little I got," Flack said belligerently. "I'm goin' to move on in, no matter how many of the fools I have to shoot down. And there'll be no pay-day till the work is done, sabe?"

"Flack, I asked for my money," Tygart repeated, and his low tone was a warning in itself.

"Try and git yore money!" Flack flared back.

With two quick strides, Tygart was on the little cowman. He seized Flack by the collar and shook him.

"Ridgeway!" Flack cried. "Stop this!"

Ridgeway motioned to all the men to close in. Twenty hirelings could take care of one rebellious man mighty easy.

Tygart, however, was ready for such concerted action. He jammed a gun into Flack's belly before anybody else could cover him.

"Call 'em off or I'll blow yore backbone out behind!" he threatened.

He whirled Flack about as a shield. Flack's eyes bulged in terror. Secretly, he had looked upon the quiet, steely-nerved young Tygart with awe and admiration.

"Sto—stop, Tygart," he begged. "I'll pay yuh."

"Dig it out, then," Tygart ordered. "Yuh owe me thirty-seven dollars."

He kept his gun in the cowman's midriff and eyes on the men who had started rallying to Ridgeway. Flack's whole body trembled while he pawed into his pocket. Obviously, his men could have killed Tygart, but Flack knew he would die first.

"Men, don't make no false moves aginst Tygart," he repeated. "He jest lost his temper. It was no time to joke. Here, Bret, ten, twenty, call it forty dollars even."

"Thirty-seven," Tygart insisted.

He made Flack pocket the twenty-dollar gold piece and give him the correct amount. Then he backed away, pulling Flack after him as a momentary shield. Ridgeway whispered hasty words to his mates. They faded from the firelight. Tygart really could not shoot any of them for that, but he knew they meant to spread out around him.

Just then a girl's voice broke in upon the thud of running boots.

"Not another step," it said, "or I'll hurt one of you. I've got you lined between me and the fire."

It was Jennie, a girl of rare fighting blood. Tygart guessed that she had followed him, to learn if she could, what Flack's next move would be, and possibly, if it included Tygart himself. However, she could have stolen away with safety to herself, since her presence was unknown. But she had made the abrupt decision to throw in with Tygart against the score of hired fighters now seeking to get him.

HER challenge had a reckless, defiant ring. Tygart thrilled to it. Such a girl! And she was fighting for him. But this was no place for her. Tygart tripped Flack to the ground and went on a run for the girl.

"Jennie, git out o' there!" he cried. "Meet me back at that clump o' rock —quick!"

Tygart knew there was danger of running flush into enemy men hugging the ground, but the girl had to be thought of first. He reached the cliff about the spot from which he was sure he had heard her voice. But no Jennie! He called her name. No answer.

A gun barked at him. Then half a dozen spurts of fire. Between shots he listened for running feet. His ear got no information as to which way she had disappeared. A bullet made him duck behind a bush and crouch low. Ridgeway's helpers, within such short range, were shooting dangerously near him, even in the dark. And crowding him. He darted around the cliff.

From behind him he caught a muffled cry which told him that somebody had been so located as to be able to capture the girl before she was aware of his presence. Now they were carrying her away, possibly to hold her as a hostage for the good behavior of Old Lonesome ranchers.

Tygart whirled back. Bullets fairly cracked against the cliff. Ridgeway began shouting for more men to shoot. Flack shrieked his command to get Tygart. His men shot lead furiously against the shadowy back-

ground. Tygart got a ball through the fleshy part of the right thigh; another numbed his left cheek with a hot furrow. He heard Jennie cry louder, as if for half a second she had torn a hand from her mouth. He raced harder for her. A gun coughed fire at him only ten paces ahead.

"Don't shoot, Tygart, or yuh'll kill her!" Ridgeway's voice bellowed.

That was how Ridgeway fought. His six-shooter spewed out a second yellow flame, but his aim was bad because Jennie was fighting him like a young wildcat. Then Tygart charged in.

Ridgeway turned Jennie loose and ran. He fired back as he went. One bullet from Tygart's gun sent Ridgeway on down the slope, gun silent. Tygart and Jennie sped off together through the scrub oak and yucca.

"I got to take yuh back home," Tygart told the girl.

"I'm glad you're going with me," she confessed frankly. "After this, the valley folks will want you to help them."

"Mebbe not. I came here to kill four men. Two have been killed today already, not by my gun, though. Besides this, I don't feel plumb like turnin' on the man that brought me in here."

"Flack turned on you, didn't he?"

She was so winsome and at the same time so fierce in her hatred of Flack. Tygart wanted to agree with her.

"Besides," she added bitterly, "they—they murdered Papa."

"He's dead?"

"Yes."

"I'm powerful sorry."

"Who are the other pair of men you mean to get?"

"Loyd Marberry and Grizzly Johnson."

"Bret, don't. I beg you. There's something bigger than revenge. Revenge kills the—the best in a man's heart."

"But I'm in Old Lonesome valley once more, to stay. Marberry and Grizzly will make me kill 'em, sooner or later."

"Maybe not. Come with me. Talk it over with them. The Old Lonesome folks in general will want you on their side—and they need a man like you, Bret."

Tygart stood at the crossroads of his life. It was hard to think of letting Marberry and Johnson escape his vengeance. But somehow the girl made revenge look ugly.

"It's been so long since they hurt you," she continued, "and today Providence has taken two of them beyond your power to kill."

Tygart realized how the very sight of this girl had been cleansing his soul of its long-cherished hate. His lust for avenging blood no longer was so strong. She was fervent in her plea.

"Will you go with me?" she asked again.

"I'll make a start at it anyway, girl," he consented. "But if I change my mind, it'll be because it jest ain't in me to let them two lynchers live."

CHAPTER III

A Necktie Party

WHEN Jennie led the way past corrals and garden, the McKnight house was in darkness. Ominously black, that house.

"They must have taken papa's body down to my sister's home," Jennie speculated.

She pointed toward Grizzly Johnson's house some four hundred yards distant. Tygart realized that she was having a hard time to keep from breaking down. Brave kid!

As they stood there, he was aware of a feeling of peril. The night was dark, eerie. That dark house—why was it left without a light?

"I reckon I better take yuh to yore sister, then," he whispered.

"Let me go in and get better clothes on," she requested.

She touched his arm when she passed him. The mere weight of her hand thrilled him. But somehow he brought his own right hand to his Colt handle. There *was* danger here. *Crunch, crunch, crunch,* her feet went on the gravel. Then—

"Tygart, we got yuh this time!"

MARBERRY'S voice. Others joined from all sides, it seemed. The Old Lonesome people had been in the dark house in desperate conference, when they heard Tygart and Jennie coming. Tygart's lack of caution had given them time to set the trap for him. Now two or three dozen men were lined up on one side of him. The other side was left open for the shower of bullets if shooting had to be done. But Tygart couldn't surrender. The very bitterness of Marberry's voice told that they meant to hang him this hour.

He made a rash dive, but he went toward them, not away from them. That made them overshoot him by inches with the first two six-shooters that popped. Jennie rushed back.

"Loyd—everybody—don't kill him! I know now that he's for us!" she cried.

Her plea would not have saved him, but she ran between Tygart and the members of the ambush party before they could turn loose a whole fusillade of shots. Tygart darted away, crouched down low. The darkness again saved him from close aiming, but it played a sad trick on him. Intent on reckless running, he did not see a hitch-post that stood solid in the ground. His head struck it full blast. He crumpled back, knocked out cold.

But none of the excited valley men had seen him bounce off the post. They fired in futile haste, scattering their shots in the general direction Tygart had gone.

"He's got away!" Marberry blurted out angrily. "Let's stop 'im. The lights! Fire the paper!"

As a precaution if needed, they had piled up old papers off from the house. The man left there, fired the papers and raced away before the blaze exposed his person to the dreaded Tygart. The fire blazed up. Every valley man peered into the outer reaches of light, hoping to catch sight of the quarry in flight. And Tygart lay there almost under their noses, shadowed by a clump of cholla between him and the fire.

"Don't see how he could've run fast enough to git plumb gone," somebody growled.

"Keep down," another warned, "or he might bust yuh from a rock or house corner."

These small ranchers were not hard-bitten men. They played safe for the moment and kept a sharp lookout. But nobody scrutinized the ground so close by them. The fire died down and still they had not discovered the helpless Tygart.

"He's clean gone," a voice proclaimed.

"Jennie," Marberry vowed, "I'm takin' yuh over to Grizzly's place. Yuh belong with yore dead father, not out here shieldin' the man that helped kill 'im."

"All right, Loyd, I'll go," Jennie agreed.

She wanted to get them away before they did find Tygart some place. Marberry and several men passed within a few yards of Tygart without stumbling onto him.

Down at the sister's home the horses were still hitched to the wagon that had hauled McKnight's body in. The subdued weeping of the bereaved family afforded a lull in the swift surge of events. Karo, a pet grizzly bear grown to vicious maturity, paced restlessly against his clanking chain, as if his wild heart felt the pent-up fury in the air. Twice he bawled aloud, perhaps at

the smell of blood on the dead man who had been carried past him.

Jennie suffered more intensely than any of the family, for her father had been parent and pard alike to her. But she also was more keenly alive to the desperate need of carrying on. She kept one ear cocked toward her own home. There was a deadly quiet up that way. The light had been put out again.

THE quiet was soon broken by smothered exclamations. Something ominous was taking place. There was hurried clumping of boots and heavy shoes. More subdued exclamations. Now and then a voice lifted unduly high in tense call. Jennie went out on the front porch. A boy came running to the house.

"They found Tygart!" he heralded breathlessly. "Goin' to swing 'im, too!"

Jennie leaped onto a horse hitched by the gate and flailed it for the house. More paper burned up, then dry wood on the fire. They had Tygart on a horse beneath a big live oak.

"Loyd—Grizzly, stop it!" she screamed.

"Yuh stay out of this!" Marberry flung back at her, for the first time allowing his wrath to show directly against her. "Don't let 'er mess with us, boys."

Men ran out and frightened her horse back. She whirled it and charged harder into the ring about Tygart. Grim hands stopped the horse, tried to tear her off. Marberry looked to see that they had her, then went on adjusting the noose about Tygart's neck. Desperation struck every thought but one from Jennie's mind. She had to save that cowboy.

She was too weak against these two dozen men. But she knew of more power at hand. Power that would carry terror to every inflamed heart on the premises. She struck a man across the face with a rope end. Then a second. They fell back. She rowelled her horse and tore away from the others holding her. For a moment sheer savage impulse made her want to turn her gun on the lynchers. But that would have been madness, perhaps a vain effort too. That other wild force could be brought in time.

She sent her horse flying back toward the Johnson house. Karo, the grizzly, stood up on his hind legs as she sped up. Jennie leaped off the horse, jerked loose the hitch-rope of the wagon team, and lashed the greys. They snorted and shied, but she swung them close by the tree to which Karo was chained, out from the yard. She yanked the team to a halt and ran over to the anchor end of the bear's chain, still holding the check reins. It took a precious half minute for her nervous fingers to find the familiar open link and undo the chain. Usually friendly with her, Karo now moved toward her, snarling. This bear had sent a man to the hospital before they took to chaining him all the time.

Jennie ran back to the wagon, lapped the loose end of the chain about an axle, took one tie in it, and leaped into the wagon. Karo was close after her, whether out of curiosity or meanness she little cared.

She lashed the horses forward. Karo was jerked to the ground. He got to all four feet and ran with the wagon, letting out an enraged bellow. Jennie lashed the horses into a harder run.

By the time she went clattering up to the fatal tree, Karo was in a fine rage. It seemed that nobody about the noose victim was aware of her desperate business until the lunging horses were within the firelight. Jennie brought the team to a prancing halt close by the outer ring of men. Again lynchers ran out to block her efforts at rescue. Rescue was long overdue. Tygart had just

been swung into the air, to strangle to death.

Jennie leaped down to unfasten Karo's chain with one hand while she held the team's reins with the other. The infuriated grizzly was on such a rampage that she froze with terror. Karo made a rush at two men who seemed to be within his range. Jennie had intended turning him loose, thinking he would frighten the mob away without getting a chance to do any harm. But now she knew that she dared not turn him loose. He would tear somebody to pieces. Men were fairly screaming at her to get out of the bear's way and keep him fastened. A rope lay in the wagon bed. Jennie pretended to be taking extra time to unfasten the chain while Karo lunged at somebody barely beyond his reach. Actually, she was tying the rope to the end of the chain. The other end of the rope she hooked into the ring of a rear standard.

"Don't run, cowards, keep right on with your lynching!" she cried.

SHE threw the end of the chain on the ground as if Karo were loosed for the unrestrained slaughter of whomever he might grasp with his powerful claws. Men scattered like frightened quail. From a safer distance a few tried to shoot the grizzly. But Karo was lunging about too furiously to afford a good target.

The second the mob melted away, Jennie let the plunging horses jerk the wagon up close by Tygart so that the front wheel struck his legs. Reaching out, she swung his body over into the wagon and tore the noose from about his neck. Tygart was unconscious. She dropped him to the floor of the wagon bed and let the horses dash away. She had saved him!

Behind her she heard such crazed shouts that she was sure the mob would cut loose after them with furious bullets. At least to kill a horse and so stop her flight with the noose victim. She was heading the horses off down the canyon, trusting more to them than her own driving to hit into the road before the wagon overturned. She glanced backward. The light of the fire somehow did not show up plainly. Jennie blinked her eyes. It looked as though there were a black void before her eyes. Then she knew. The grizzly bear was up in the end of the wagon!

Every nerve in her body seemed to freeze; the reins fell from her hands; the horses burst into a mad runaway. Jennie knew that her .38 Colt had little chance against the bear when it was down on all four feet with that thick, sloping skull the center of the target. She could have leaped from the swaying wagon and trusted to luck for no more than a broken leg or arm in the landing, but that would have left Tygart at the grizzly's mercy.

Only once that fearful thought flashed through her mind. The deep, awful growl of the bear snapped her back into action. He was coming for her. She ought to leap. But Jennie wasn't going by herself. She clamped her arms about Tygart, and with the strength born of desperation, lifted him up for the leap.

Too late, though. The bear was upon her. His great paw shot out and clawed about her neck. He was pulling her to him. She actually felt the hot breath and froth from his horrible red mouth.

The horses leaped across a shallow dry wash. The wagon overturned. Jennie never knew what followed that.

Tygart became aware of a starry sky, then a horrible growl within a few feet of him. The last he had known was the choking rope about his neck. Was this another world? Hell? He was dazed, bewildered.

He saw a huge black hulk looming almost over him. He tried to jump away from the thing and run.

But his foot was trapped beneath the edge of the overturned wagon bed.

His senses cleared. It was a grizzly bear threatening him. The frothing animal struck at him, snarled. A chain was holding it back. From its clank the chain seemed to be caught somewhere in a wrecked wagon. The horses had torn loose and were speeding on.

TYGART grabbed for his gun. He had none. Any second the bear might break loose. It began to tear at its chain. Then it turned back the other way, as if at another enemy. Tygart could make out the form of something on the ground.

He tried to get his foot out. The ankle was crushed too painfully. Twisting about, he tried to lift the heavy wagon bed. Cramped in such a position, he could not budge it. The grizzly was still fighting at something just beyond its reach, the length of its limited chain from Tygart.

Tygart fixed his eyes on the thing the bear was trying to get at. Jennie! She was stretched on the ground, close to the wagon bed. The bear was getting nearer to her by inches as it heaved its weight against the chain. The chain was yielding a little at a time. It might give away at any new surge. Jennie lay motionless; Tygart was sure that she had been knocked senseless. He grabbed hold of the wagon bed, but he hesitated. If he should be able to lift it, he might let the bear loose.

CHAPTER IV

Flaming Hearts

HE sat there a moment, mind in a chaos of thoughts. The raging bear kept on tearing its chain loose a bit at a time, to get at Jennie. Then Tygart heard shouting. Men were running this way. The bear's vicious growls would draw them here. Horses' hoofs beat the earth.

Now other mob members were galloping for them. They were no more than a quarter of a mile away. They meant as sure death to Tygart as the bear did. The grizzly gave an enraged surge and moved a hand's breadth nearer Jennie. It slapped at her with a huge paw, and missed less than a foot. Tygart had to take his chances on getting loose.

He caught the lower edge of the bed, and heaved again on it. It still was too heavy. Then he fell onto his back, got his loose foot set against the wagon bed and gave a pushing lift. The wagon bed barely moved. He heaved with every ounce of strength left him. It lifted, turned up on its side. And the bear was still fast.

On hands and knees, Tygart raced around the grizzly. The bear went into a greater fury. Tygart snatched the girl back. He was gathering her into his arms when he realized that a horseman was close upon him. He was in no condition to run or fight. He took a rolling turn from the bear, Jennie clasped in his arms. Then he lay still. More horsemen were coming.

"Bret, take my gun. I thought you were dead."

It was Jennie's whisper. The girl had been fully conscious all this time, but her legs had been pinned beneath the wagon bed. With amazing courage, she had feigned death. Normally, a bear is not so likely to at-

tack an enemy which it believes to be dead. But this Karo was in too great a rage to reckon with.

Tygart felt about for her six-shooter, but it had been knocked from Jennie's hand in the spill. Karo was raging at them. The nearest rider was only twenty yards away.

"I can't run," Jennie lamented, lips close to Tygart's ear. "My legs are numbed."

"Broken?" Tygart exclaimed, almost too loud.

"No, just numb."

"Then jest play dead for a spell."

The first horseman arriving sprang down and stuck a match to the dry grass. That enabled him to survey the wreckage and also served to keep the grizzly at a safe distance. It was Marberry.

"Hey, the bear's killed Jennie—and Tygart!" Marberry cried.

MARBERRY ran to Jennie. He had his six-shooter ready in his hand, as desperate defense against the grizzly, should it get at him. He bent over the girl, to carry her away.

Tygart grabbed his gun wrist with both hands. He jerked the hand across his shoulder and brought the wrist down. The gun dropped. Tygart seized it. Marberry fled as if he expected the weapon to be turned on him the next instant.

But Tygart wanted Marberry's horse just then, not the owner. The animal was snorting off sideward, reins dragging. Tygart hobbled up to it, talking coaxingly, even when four riders were already within the light of the burning grass. He lost many precious seconds, but he got the reins in his hands.

He spurred the horse up close to Jennie, dropped off, threw her into the saddle and sprang up behind her. Only Jennie's presence kept the guns from barking their death talk after him. But he did not take her away as a shield. He had to get her beyond Karo's reach; also, the girl had to be forced out of this wild sweep of range war.

Men shouted after him; some guns blazed in evident hope of frightening him into a return and surrender. Tygart kept on to old bachelor Booker's big 'dobe dwelling. Booker was one of the men who had helped swing Tygart to the live oak. He probably would not come back home tonight.

Carrying Jennie into the Booker house, Tygart placed her on the dirty bed. He did not risk lighting a lamp. Searchers might be guided here. Jennie was almost completely paralyzed from the hips down.

"But I'll be all right soon," she declared. "No bones broken, just bruised and numbed."

"Well," Tygart said. "I'm goin' to tie yore hands to make certain yuh stay right here on this bed for a spell."

"You're not going to tie me," she exclaimed, trying to lurch away from his hand.

"I am," he vowed. "Yuh've come messin' into these fights till it's a wonder yuh're alive. Such luck won't hold, so I'm leavin' yuh hog-tied till the worst of it is all over."

She tried to break away. He had to imprison her in his arms before he could wrap a strip of a blanket about her wrists. The close embrace of her slender body was maddening. It was a mad night anyway. No wonder he lost his head. With her hands secure behind her back, he crushed her tighter to him, pressed his lips down upon hers in fierce abandon.

"God, girl, how I love yuh!" he whispered hoarsely, and kissed her again.

For a bare moment he thought that she was giving him kiss for kiss. But the next instant a broken whimper escaped her lips. Then, quickly changing again, she kicked viciously at his shins. Ashamed, he dropped her back onto the bed.

"Yuh got a right to hate me for this," he apologized. "It's the second time I've done it—countin' the dance."

He hurried out, closed and tied the door on the outside. Then he hobbled to his horse and rode away with confusion in his heart. He saw now that the fight would end only with the defeat or death of Flack. The valley ranchers could not be driven from their homes and robbed of their small outfits. Tygart had come in here hating everybody in the valley. But Jennie loved the Old Lonesome; its people were her people. Its people would be the people of his own sons and daughters in the years ahead. He had to fight for them. He knew it now. He had to fight for her.

AT last, yielding to the inevitable fate of that decision, he rode across the valley. Morning would find the battle flaring again in the pass. No matter if not a valley man would welcome him, he was going to be there to help thrust back the invader. Strangely enough, he did not blame the Old Lonesome men for their stand against him. They would welcome him as soon as he proved that the bitterness was gone from his own heart.

He wanted to be the first to challenge Flack's fresh thrust in the morning. To do so, he must go through the pass and get beyond the first line of defenders. He could not ride through. He tied his horse in a dry wash and set off afoot.

His injured ankle, although not broken, gave him so much pain, that he had to quit putting it to the ground. He got two sticks and hobbled up around the mountainside in tortuous slowness. The night was all too quiet. Not a shot; never a call. But the lull itself whispered of fury that was damming up for the morrow.

At last the dim light of morning. Tygart was in between two big rocks, well down in the pass. To his surprise, the Old Lonesome men had dropped back into the pass to a still more narrow neck. Flack's men had followed them. Now they lay facing each other. But this shift left Tygart too far within Flack's side of the pass. He started working his way up along the hillside.

"Listen, yuh milk-pen ranchers, I got yuh outfoxed plenty this mornin'." Flack's voice lifted on the morning air. "If yuh don't git out of that pass, every house inside of five miles of here will go up in smoke. I sent out ten men hours ago. They're waitin' for the smoke signal from me, one man to every house."

That threat brought one thought whipping into Bret's mind. Even if Jennie had regained full use of her legs by this time, she might not be able to get out of the room in which she had been left. If the firebug assigned to the Booker house should steal up to fire it, Jennie might not be aware of her peril until the flames began crackling. By that time the Flack hireling would be out of hearing.

"Yuh don't dare do a thing like that," Marberry was shouting back at Flack.

More threats flew back and forth. The Old Lonesome crowd would not yield.

"All right," Flack shouted, waving a handkerchief.

A man on a high point shouted that he understood, then started a fire. Green leaves were piled on to send up a cloud of smoke. Tygart could not see the Booker house or any other, but he watched the treetops over a ranch home three miles up the valley. Watched with an anxiety that brought pain into his heart.

He thought that Flack was trying to bluff the Old Lonesome men. But if the invaders were low-lifed enough to burn the ranchhouses, Ty-

gart's job was cut out for him. How he dreaded it! Not that he was afraid to die, but he hated to go with his homecoming so badly settled—and knowing that Jennie might be burned alive!

CHAPTER V

Peace in the Valley

HE could not wait until actual smoke showed that Flack was not bluffing. He went hobbling down the hillside, unmindful of the pain in his ankle. Down behind some bushes, the Flack men had left a few horses for quick availability if needed. Tygart made for them. Flack could not stop him, because he was short-handed in the pass already.

There it was, smoke above the trees. Black smoke as from a tar roof. At least that ranchhouse was afire. Tygart backed the speediest-looking horse and sent it flying up through the pass.

"Git that fool comin' yonder!" Flack cried.

Tygart had to run a double gauntlet. The fighters on both sides of the pass were after his scalp. But he had to go through. He tried to stop the Old Lonesome men from shooting at him.

"Listen, Old Lonesome, Jennie's in the Booker house—tied up!" he shouted.

But the cry of rifles drowned his words. Flack and six men opened fire on him. The Old Lonesome men must have thought that this was only one more trick to fool them. When the Flack crew twisted about to fire at Tygart, they necessarily exposed their backs more or less to the Old Lonesome defenders. They took quick advantage of the opportunity. Guns popped viciously.

One of Flack's men crumpled down where he lay. His death warned the invaders that the Old Lonesome bullets were more dangerous than one man dashing up on a horse. But their efforts to shoot both ways at once destroyed a great deal of their effectiveness.

Even so, bullets ripped around Tygart. One tore his right ear half off. Two raked his horse for flesh wounds. Another passed through Tygart's side, but it was shallow. Tygart saw what a panicky bunch he had before him. He held his fire until he was within thirty yards of the nearest man. Then he cut loose with deliberate trigger. His first shot only raked an exposed back. The man ducked behind his rock.

Then Tygart saw Ridgeway just ahead of him, rifle pushing up at him. Tygart thrust his six-shooter out and turned a bullet loose without aim of bead. But the bullet was grooved at its target. Ridgeway's rifle muzzle tilted into the sky and Ridgeway lay groaning over it.

Utterly panic-stricken, Flack tried to dodge over to a larger boulder. An Old Lonesome rifle knocked him sideward. Another of the much vaunted Drillers tried to flash a rifle up in a quick shot at the racing Tygart. Tygart was within ten yards of him—a deadly range. The Driller fell back, blood spewing from his neck.

Hardly knowing how it was done, Tygart found himself dashing on by the last Flack hireling. He was headed for the Old Lonesome line.

"Fellers, I got to git Jennie outa Booker's house," he cried again.

"Don't let 'im trick yuh!" Marberry fairly screamed in counter appeal. "Mow 'im down—now!"

"Yeah, kill 'im before he kills you!" Grizzly Johnson seconded.

But the rest of the Old Lonesome crowd had seen the deadly work of Bret Tygart's six-gun on the Flack gang. Anybody but one so fired with hate as Marberry could have seen that there was no fake about

the way Tygart had cut his way past that gang. Johnson might well think he had to kill Tygart or be killed.

Tygart, however, was willing to let private grudges be forgotten for the moment. Only Jennie counted. He tried to steer around the spot where Marberry and Johnson lay. But the cramped pass forced him within pistol range of them.

"Men, look," Tygart cried, "the Booker house is on fire—Jennie in it. Let me go git 'er out!"

But Johnson and Marberry bellowed anew at their friends to cut him out of the saddle, and they started their own guns at the task. Only one thing was left for Tygart to do—get Johnson and Marberry if he could. He swerved his horse squarely for them.

It was a terrible moment: guns roaring, enemies shouting like madmen, bullets thudding. Tygart fired on Johnson. Missed! Marberry gouged his gun up and triggered almost point-blank at Tygart. Tygart's gun was whipping fast onto him. The dread of the smoking muzzle must have made Marberry jerk when he triggered; anyway, his bullet only raked Tygart's side. Johnson, cooler, took like aim at Tygart, but his gun snapped. Tygart's gun also was empty.

Tygart was almost upon them. He suddenly ducked far downward and struck Johnson hard on the head with the empty gun. His horse reared up, plunged sideward, sped on. Marberry fired twice more at him, but in such crazed haste, that Tygart was not touched. The incredible had happened. He was in the open again, riding with the wind.

He heard men behind him trying to stop Marberry from pursuit. But Marberry tore away from them, raced to a horse and came clattering after him. He knew that Tygart had no more cartridges, either in his gun or out.

Tygart's horse began failing. The two wounds were telling on it, but Tygart held its head up for a hundred yards. Then it went down. He rolled free of the animal and hobbled on as fast as he could. For the Booker house was sending flames leaping a hundred feet into the sky. Pain sickened him; he was cold all over from fear that Jennie was burning even now. He almost forgot Marberry riding hard after him.

He realized his peril when a bullet stung over his head. But he was within reach of the house. He never even looked back. Every ounce of his strength went into that race with the flames.

HE hurled himself at the front door as he reached it. It gave way and he went falling inside. There was Jennie, trying to kick open the high window.

"I'll get out—grab that Winchester!" she called.

She went darting out the door. Tygart had to go out that way, too. An old Winchester stood in the corner; he snatched it up. Then he leaped into the yard, eyes and lungs filled with smoke.

Marberry had all the advantages save one. The horse which he had taken so hastily, reared and plunged at the shooting. Tygart could see only the moving blur of Marberry and mount. But he flashed the old .48-.70 Winchester on it and pulled the trigger. Three times more he pumped cartridges into the rifle and fired. Marberry fired back, but never with the horse still. Then Marberry went sliding from his saddle, dead.

Jennie came running up to him.

"Untie my hands, Bret," she urged. "We're both outlawed after this. Let's clean out."

"Naw, I got a hunch they'll let us stay. Me and you, Jennie, little ranchers like the rest of 'em."

"Yes, me and you, Bret, forever and forever!"

To the Thrum of Guitars, La Paloma Lulls the Toughest Men in Los Pinos While She Keeps Her Lonely Vigil

She fired. The man fell through the doorway

The Right to Love

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Last of the Gun Breed," "Outlaws Return," etc.

LOS PINOS was a cluster of adobe and false-front houses that burned brown on a rise overlooking the Rio Grande where the ford carried the trail from the States across into Mexico. Men came and men went by that ford, coming down the mountainside, crossing into the States, and going back again. Men who didn't talk much.

By day it was blistering hot and grim, and few men showed their faces to the sun. The adobes baked with sullen silence and the board sides of the nameless saloon shrank and tried to shade the habitants, who slept by day. Los Pinos was a jumping-off place for the lawless.

By night a cooling breath of air whispered down out of the mountain

pass across the Big River and the crickets picked up their chirp and the fireflies blinked like sparkling diamonds. Here and there a guitar tinkled, a musical voice arose in a snatch of a song, and men moved in the direction of the saloon.

There was a dance-floor there, and there were girls who would come out of the mysterious darkness of the rooms above the bar. Girls in bright colors with painted lips and smiles on their faces.

Men would drift into the place, strangers who stopped here a while and then went their ways without saying good-by. Men like "Stogie" Allen, lean of jaw, wary of walk, and carrying guns that always hung within reach. Men like Stogie, who just drifted in, smoking his cheap cigars and blinking with expressionless eyes at the other patrons of the saloon, and at the girls.

STOGIE ALLEN looked coldly at most of the girls, but he did not look coldly at the girl of the golden voice and the face of an angel. That girl was named Rosa, and they called her *La Paloma,* the dove.

This stranger with the cold face smiled a cold smile at Rosa when she came down from the second floor of the pine-board saloon and sang for the men and danced for them with light toes barely touching the floor, and with the scarlet fringe of her mantilla flashing in the light. For this cold-faced Stogie Allen had been paying court to her during the week of his presence here.

On this night when he had been here a week, the man, with the long black cigar eternally in his mouth, was waiting when the sun went down and the fireflies began their sparkling messages and the strings of the guitars twanged their first plaintive melodies.

While he talked to her, another man rode the settlement of Los Pinos, where the ford crossed the river into Mexico. He came quietly in the darkness.

This rider who came in the night was lean and tall and young, and he sat squarely, fearlessly in the saddle. His muscles were supple and strong as whipcord, tireless and fresh despite his long trip. He was astride a long-barreled bay horse that was sound of wind after his steady gait. He was leading another bay horse that would have made a team so nearly matched were they. The man eased the animals down to a walk when he saw the blinking lights of the settlement, and then he skirted away from the main trail that led toward the saloon.

Bob Colton, they called him, and the sheriffs were hunting him. The brand of "highwayman" was on him and there was money for the man who brought him in, dead or alive. After every one of his raids the reward increased, because it became increasingly clear that he was a smart man and hard to catch. He seemed to have eyes and ears everywhere, yet no man ever saw him.

Now Bob Colton's ears and his keen eyes located the one feed corral in the settlement, and he rode up to it from the rear, tying his animals outside the pole fence. Inside the corral, afoot, he went about stealing ears of corn, a few here and a few there, from the horses eating at the feed troughs.

"You won't miss 'em," he apologized to the animals he had robbed. "And we need a snack of good solid food. It's a long ways to the mountain-top."

He took the ears of corn in his arms and led his horses away into the outer darkness and hobbled them, and then the animals settled down to eat. As they crunched the corn between their teeth the man disappeared into the darkness, in the direction of the saloon.

Inside the saloon, Stogie Allen was talking to the girl called *La Paloma*. They were standing before the bar. The man suddenly, as though he could control his emotions no longer, took her by the arm and led her back to a booth curtained off by a painted matting curtain. Inside the booth he caught her in his arms and pressed her to him hungrily.

"Rosa," he pleaded, and it was the first time he had betrayed any emotion, "I can't stand it any longer. I want to take yuh out of here! Don't yuh understand? Yuh don't belong in a place like this."

"You mean that you want to marry me?" the girl asked, and looked at him closely.

Stogie Allen hardly hesitated a moment. "Yes," he said. "I'll marry you, anything to get you out of here, so men like this bunch of coyotes won't be pawing at you all the time."

They had sat down across the table from each other in the curtained booth. The girl's hand nervously scratched on the tablecloth, and she was breathing deeply. She studied the face of the man across from her.

"All right," she said suddenly. "We'll leave right now. Right this minute."

HIS answer came quickly. "Well, not right now. But pretty soon, just a few days. I've got to stick around."

There was bitter amusement in the smile that tightened the corner of the girl's mouth. "I know," she said. "I've heard that story too often. I knew you didn't mean what you said."

There was an interruption as the voice of the bartender called his name just outside the booth. "Feller wants to see yuh," the man said. "He's in a kinda lather."

Stogie Allen got up. "Damn," he said, then caught the girl by the shoulders. "I've been expecting that feller," he said sharply. "I might be goin' away for a while. But understand this, I don't want nobody hanging around you while I'm gone. And when I get back I'm takin' you with me. Savvy? Now you wait."

Stogie Allen left the booth. Outside, lined up at the bar with the rest of the drinkers he saw a man in chaps and a sweaty blue shirt, his spurs still clinking on his feet, and his face covered with trail dust. Allen drifted over and stood beside him, moving with a careless air that made it seem purely accident.

"Have a drink, stranger?" he invited.

The man talked to Allen in an undertone while they had their drinks. Then Allen flipped a silver dollar on the bar and the two strolled out of the saloon a few minutes apart.

Rosa, *La Paloma*, watched them go, and then she came out of the booth. She paid no attention to the line-up at the bar who shouted for her to sing for them. She made her way up the pine stairs to her room.

Across her small and ill-furnished room from the door she had entered there was another door, in place of a window. It opened out onto the flat roof of the barroom, making the roof a porch to her room. A brightly-colored piece of Indian cloth hung over the opening to the roof, so that the breeze could pour into her room, fresh and cool from the mountain-tops.

She crossed the room and opened the curtain over the outer doorway so that the breeze would have a full sweep into the room. Then she went back downstairs. She halted on the stairs and her eyes swept the rough crowd with a quick glance.

The bartender, polishing a glass with a dirty towel, said to one of the customers, "Something strange about the Dove tonight. Must have somethin' eatin' on her mind."

"*La Paloma!*" The crowd was looking up at her, shouting, "*La Paloma!* Give us a dance! Dance for us, Dove."

Rosa nodded her head and a couple of Mexicans picked up their guitars and sat down in a corner of the room.

As the strings of the two guitars poured out the soft Spanish melody of *La Paloma* the music seemed to penetrate the girl's body and set it afire. The men shouted as the movements of the dance inflamed them with its limpid beauty.

The music grew warmer, the guitar strings sang of love, of the lover who was going away, of the maiden who waited for him, heart-sick for his return. The girl's face seemed to light up as she danced, as though with some secret new flame that none but her could feel. It was as though there had suddenly come to her some great cause for rejoicing, for gaiety, or for such desperate courage that this might be her last night of life.

She had caught the glimpse of a face peering in through the open window. A shadowy face that was gone as quickly as it had come.

THEN the music stopped and the dance was over and she was hurrying away, her feet tinkling up the stairs before the last note had hardly died away, before the crowd could grasp her and make her stay with them. She fled up to her room and sank into the deep confines of the small sofa in her room.

The look of exaltation was gone from her face. The room was quiet, and she was alert, like a bird ready for flight. The long lashes of her eyes opened and closed with nervousness as she looked around the room apprehensively.

Then she was looking at the drapery across the door which led out to the roof of the saloon. She had opened that drapery only a few moments before. It was closed now, swaying gently in the breeze.

Her eyes widened suddenly and she sat breathlessly staring at it. Her hands clenched and her breath came in spasmodic gasps.

The drapery moved inward slightly with the breeze, then settled back still, as though a person had moved it. The girl's eyes narrowed, focused on it as the eyes of a bird hypnotized by a snake. She felt a cold chill run up and down her spine, a sinking sensation of panicky fear.

Somebody was behind that curtain, watching her. She felt eyes on her, yet she could not see them. She bit her lips, and her eyes never left that curtain, swaying gently in the breeze, swaying inward, then settling back. But never swaying outward—because it was being stopped by a human form.

Her hands were icy, clutching each other. Tiny beads of cold sweat came out on her white forehead. Still she watched the drapery.

Then with a slow gentle motion the breeze swung the drapery inward again; and still again it floated back outward—and billowed against the form of a man's body. A man standing still and silent as death just outside on the roof.

The girl wiped her forehead with a trembling wrist, then leaned over toward the little table beside her. She opened its drawer slowly and her cold hand fumbled within it.

Her hand came out gripping the small handle of a nickeled .38 pistol. She pointed the weapon toward the hanging at the doorway. The hand was steady now, with a new resolve.

"Come in here," she said sharply, "with your hands up."

There was no answer. The drapery hung still.

"I know who you are," the girl said in a cold voice.

A puff of breeze moved the cur-

tain, but the person hidden behind it did not move.

Then the girl said calmly: "I know who you are. You are that highwayman who has been following me wherever I got a job. Your name is Colton. I've told you before that I'm *not* going with you down to your headquarters at Ruidoso. You've trailed me long enough. I've got a gun aimed at you, and if you don't come out with your hands in the air this minute I'm going to shoot you without further warning. *Come out!*"

Still the form behind the curtain was unmoving. Its outline against the curtain was like that of a statue.

The girl's face went grim. She tightened the trigger of the weapon and the gun popped in the still night like a giant firecracker, and a little puff of grey smoke curled up from its muzzle.

A heavy figure fell inward, into the room, bringing down the drapery with it.

The girl looked at the prone form and gave a startled cry. She crossed the room quickly, tossing the gun on the sofa, and knelt down beside the figure.

It was not Bob Colton she had shot. It was Stogie Allen.

The man had a bullet through the thick part of his leg. He was trying to get up off the floor while the girl beside him tried to explain.

"I'm so sorry," she cried excitedly. "I thought it was somebody else. I didn't mean to kill you. I thought—"

Stogie Allen was sitting up now, and trying to staunch the flow of blood with a handkerchief. He pulled out one of his eternal black cigars and lit it, sitting on the floor. He looked at the girl quizzically.

"That's all right. It's just a flesh wound and don't hurt much. I'm glad you done it. Reckon I owe you an explanation of what I was sneakin' around spyin' on you for, too."

The girl did not answer.

"You see," Allen explained, "I kinda had a suspicion all along that you was that Bob Colton's girl. There's a rumor around that wherever you are he usually puts in an appearance. My man just told me a while ago that he had found Colton's bay horse, after trailin' him here, and that Colton had another horse along with him. That's the feller that wanted to see me while I was talkin' to you. So naturally I reckoned he'd be comin' to see you, and I could get him.

"But I heard enough from your own lips to see that the idea's all wrong. He was—botherin' you, instead of bein' yore sweetheart, eh? I'm sure glad o' that."

BEFORE the girl could say anything there was a crowd gathered outside her hall door, coming up from downstairs at the sound of the shot. One of the crowd in the doorway was the dusty rider who had talked to Allen a little while earlier. Allen called him in.

"Git a move on you, Shorty," he ordered. "We was all wrong about this gal. Go up the mountain road and git Slim and both of you duck down and lay for Colton on the Ruidoso Trail. His headquarters is down at Ruidoso, not up the mountains. He was gonna take this girl down there with him. Git goin'."

Allen looked at the crowd in the doorway. "How about me deputizin' some of you other men to help git him? Bob Colton's got five thousand dollars in gold on his head—dead or alive. The Eagle Mining Company will pay the reward. He's stole a dozen or more of their shipments."

One of the men who had been standing in the doorway was a short heavy person with hard grey eyes.

"I reckon you got this bunch wrong," he said coldly. "So yuh're

(Continued on page 143)

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

in th' Rawhide bank, an' proposed tuh one o' them daughters an' war accepted. Things shore looked fine fer Hank, an' I gotta admit th' gal war gittin' a durned A-1 husband, too. Hank warn't no slouch, no way, 'cept his allers spendin' too much o' his pay fer fancy ridin' duds.

He could git hisself up more like one o' them cirkus Romeos what prances 'round a ring on a palomina bronc, than any hombre on our payroll. But he did his work up tuh snuff, could fork anything with four laigs an' stay put, an' in bulldoggin' had a two-lengths' lead on th' rest uv us come them Sunday mawnin's. So we lets them dudey clothes pass, never duckin' 'im in th' waterin' trough but onct on a snowy mawnin' when we knowed he war goin' ridin' with his bride-tuh-be.

He Took It Good-Natured

An' he took it so danged good-natured that th' joke part busted all tuh hell an' we lent 'im our clothes right away. Yuh jest gotta like a fella like that, an' we admired his gal a heap—th' purtiest o' th' Jules bunch—flossy hair, blue eyes an' all th' feminine trimmin's, an' she shore could ride broncs an' toss a rope. Th' marriage seemed cut from th' right pattern, an' ev'rything woulda come out fine 'cept fer Dude Chaney's jealousy. Dude never could stand seein' 'nother fella win a gal, whether he wants 'er or not. Jest a habit o' his'n.

Well, come a bright day. Dude, he rides up tuh th' line shack Jess Lawler an' me war occupyin' as our two-by-four quarters an' tells us th' boss wants we should romp back tuh th' ranch fer th' weddin', all hands invited an' plenty kegged stuff tuh be provided after th' ceremony, baile an' all that.

Th' Invite Sounded Good

Th' invite sounded good. Livin' in a lonely line shack ain't what yuh'd call right glorious fer excitement o' city things, so Jess Lawler an' me saddles up an' goes back tuh th' home ranch with Dude, feelin' right perky. On th' way, Dude tells us that they's jest only one thing our boss hates 'bout th' comin' weddin', an' that's th' parson's tile hat. That ol' hat stood coupla feet almost, above th' li'l parson's *cabesa*, an' had seen better days.

From front tuh rear, it had coupla round holes in it where bullets, one time durin' a burial among a sorta happy gatherin', had sorta cut short th' parson's burial service when he got referrin' tuh th' evil o' drink an' couplin' it with th' deceased's rather sudden cut-off from life.

A Solemn Repytation

Since that time, folks had sorta disliked th' parson's wearin' that hat, which growed tuh bear a right solemn repytation as bein' connected with sudden demise an' meanin' mystery an' bad medicine, like them ol' Injun beliefs.

Gave folks a sorta shivery feelin', listenin' tuh his outdoor meetin's an' watchin' them two bullet holes. But th' li'l parson stuck tuh that durned tile determined. Wouldn't change an' couldn't git another sech out in th' cow country. Bullet holes or not, he'd wear it on all occashuns, durn 'im.

Well, Dude says th' boss wants Jess Lawler an' me should discover a way tuh steal that hat afore th' ceremony, an' me an' Jess, bein' loyal, promises. Reachin' th' ranch, we gangs up in our secret duty with Lod Littleton, who had uh eye like a badger fer keenness an' a brain tuh match.

While th' parson war sittin' in th' ranch parlor, asmilin' happy tuh all hands, an' Hank Martin an' his bride-tuh-be war holdin' hands like nobody's business an' th' hull family singin' some old range songs an' tappin' th' barrel tuh be in proper spirits fer th' weddin', uh hour off, Lod led me an' Jess an' sneaks 'round th' back way, tiptoes tuh th' ol'-fashioned hatrack in th' long hall, grabs that

tile hat an' snoops back outside in our stockinged hoofs.

A Can o' Red Pepper

An' there, among th' tall mesquite, we runs ontuh th' other kids what ol' Jules had brung intuh this wicked world. Them youngsters had a can o' red pepper an' war sprinklin' it inside th' bride's weddin' shoes!

"We wanna see 'er dance happy," they told us. An' it give us three fellas uh idee.

We cuts out a piece o' stiff paper, roun' an' jest th' size o' th' inside o' that tile hat, pastes it up inside th' crown, high an' slopin' forward tuh th' bullet hole in its front.

On th' paper we sprinkles plenty o' that red pepper so's whenever th' li'l parson nodded his haid, some o' th' red pepper'd slip down an' out through th' hole, hit th' front brim an' slide over it.

They'd Shore Be Weepin'

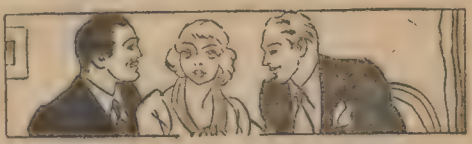
They'd shore be some weepin' an' sneezin', while th' bride'd be startin' her cake-walk in them hot brogans. Then we puts th' tile back on th' hatrack in th' hall, slips 'round front, joins up with th' crowd o' merry-makers an' stands awaitin' th' ceremony.

Before th' pianer in th' livin' room, what war filled with wild flowers in big tin cans an' coupla th' milk buckits, th' parson stood solemn an' waitin', open marriage book in hand, th' tile on his bald haid. Up romps big Hank with his gal on his arm, both smilin' an' her shovin' back her Ma's yallered bridal veil so's tuh leave her face bare.

Old Jules an' his squat li'l wife o' many years comes forward, proud, haids up, wearin' their best tuckers an' ol' Jules with a red sash 'round his waist what'd onct been give 'im fer a prize in slaughterin' hawgs at a barbecue—th' sash bein' th' pride o' his life. Rest uv us crowded 'round clost. One o' th' gals o' Jules started playin' th' pianer, soft-like, th' one tune she knowed—"Bury me not on th' Lone Prairee."

(Continued on page 138)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



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(Continued from page 137)

Th' Fun Begins

Well, th' parson, he bends his haid over his book an' nods, starts readin' in a deep voice. Hank grabs his bride's hand an' stiffens proud as a outlaw-bronc jest outa a buckin' chute, almost pawin'. But that bendin' o' his haid an' th' nod, what th' parson gave, started th' red pepper slipping through that bullet hole and down clost tuh his eyes an' nose. He busted out in loud sneezes, pronto, an' his orbs streamed tears. Hank an' th' gals stares at 'im, then begins weepin' an' sneezin like all hell.

Ol' Jules an' his wife hopped close, tuh help find out what war th' matter, an' then *they* started them sneezes an' weepin's. Th' crowd jammed up, an' th' parson's haid war bobbin' up an' down, an' then ev'rybody war sneezin' an' cryin'. Th' day war hot, sunny, an' first thing we knowed, that pepper in th' bride's shoes got busy an' she starts hoppin' up an' down, yellin', sneezin', weepin'.

We Flung Out a Winder

Lod an' Jess Lawler an' me, we figgered gittin' outa there'd pay well. We flung out a winder—an' landed plumb among them Jules kids, who was jumpin' up an' down, laffin' like a bunch o' them chatterin' monkeys we reads about in them old geographies or sech.

All uv us dove into th' mesquite an' hid out, listenin' tuh th' yells comin' from inside. Then we seen that tile hat come streakin' outa th' open winder, all torn tuh pieces. Cusses o' men follered an' come th' thunder o' rushin' boots as them hombres inside come bulgin' outa th' front door, grippin' guns an' yellin' our names—an' led, durn 'im, by Dude Chaney hisself, an' him ayellin' we was th' ones what had done it!

Well, folks, tuh make a long story short, we surrendered, us an' them Jules kids, hands shoulder high. Them folks shoved us in th' waterin' trough an' kept us there while th' parson, standin' bareheaded before it, performed th' rest o' the ceremony. Hank throwed his foot-wigglin'

bride intuh a waitin' buckboard an' druv off amidst a shower o' rice an' ol' shoes an' plenty yells an' guns poppin' 'em "Happy Journey." Then the gang lets us git outa that waterin' trough an' leads us all back tuh th' barrel what's on a table in the kitchen, plenty tin cups around it, an' we all thaws out.

But I'll never forgit th' view I had o' that bride's bare feet as she rode away in th' buckboard. She'd ripped off them hot shoes an' war pokin' her feet out sideways intuh th' cool wind that war comin' up nice. But her and Hank was smilin', even at that.

Yes, suh, it war a happy crowd in th' end of the festivities, an' that's th' sorta crowd we cowfolks cotton to. Jest like th' sorta folks we want in our BRANDING FIRE CLUB, and th' kind we're gittin'.

Lots o' yuh been askin' jest what you are supposed tuh do tuh be a member of th' Club in good standin'. All we ask is your interest and loyalty tuh th' glamorous wide open spaces of th' West, an' tuh THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

(Continued on page 140)

THRILLING RANCH STORIES
22 West 48th Street
New York

DEAR TEX: Please enroll me as a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB and send me my membership identification card. I agree to be active in keeping the Branding Fire Burning.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State ..... Age .....

Favorite Hobbies .....

I am enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope in which you are to mail my membership card.

Signed .....

Date .....

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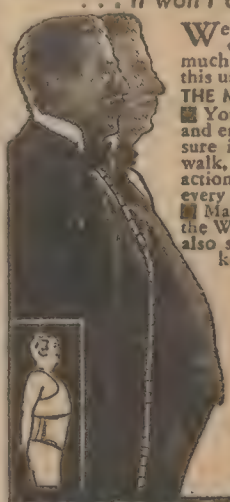

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POPULAR WESTERN

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(Continued from page 139)

If Yuh Wants to Join—

If yuh wants tuh join up with th' outfit that's gathered 'round THE BRANDING FIRE jest write us a letter telling us which stories yuh liked best, an' what appeals tuh yuh most about the magazine. An' be shore tuh fill out th 'coupon on page 139 and send it in with your letter. We'll send yore membership card along *pronto!* Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.

We jest keep right on gettin' lots of letters all of th' time. First one we picked up this time is from Maryland.

Dear Tex:

I am a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, and I enjoyed all of the stories in the June issue very much.

Here's what I'm like. Have brown curly hair and brown eyes. Am 5 feet 2 inches tall. Weight 120 pounds and am 17 years old. Would like to hear from pen pals of all ages. Both boys and girls are welcome to write, and I'll promise to answer every letter I receive.

I'll close saying that THRILLING RANCH STORIES is the best magazine that ever was. Sincerely,

Florence Kosmicky.
25 N. Rose St., Baltimore, Md.

Thanks, Florence. Shore glad that yuh like the magazine so well. Hope yuh'll be hearin' from some of th' folks soon.

And hyer's a letter from out in sunny California.

Dear Tex:

I have just finished one of the many issues of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, and they are the best cowboy stories I have ever read.

I am very fond of music and can play the accordion and the harmonica. I am 18 years old, curly golden hair and brown eyes, height 5 feet 5 inches, weight 116 pounds. I promise to answer any letters from any one who will write to me. Yours truly,

Jermana Bernice Oliveiro.
Rt. 1, Box 297, Laton, California.

Shore glad tuh have yuh 'round th' old BRANDING FIRE, Jermana—and am right tickled over th' way yuh like THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

This time it's a letter from England. Seems like folks all over th'

world like stories 'bout the West an' are anxious tuh join THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some years now. I think it is one of the best (did I say *one of?* Sorry, I meant *the* best) magazine on the market. I get every copy regularly.

I am enclosing a stamped addressed envelope for my membership card and am looking forward to being enrolled as a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. I enjoy all the stories in your magazine, especially any by Cliff Walters, Clee Woods, etc.

I live on a poultry farm here in Lancashire and do the bookkeeping. I am 24 years old, blue-eyed, brown-haired, and would like very much to correspond with some cowboys or cowgirls or anyone else who cares to write. I promise interesting letters, as I have visited most of our famous beauty spots, and should be pleased to exchange snapshots.

Here's hoping that someone will answer the plea of a lonely Lancashire Lass. I should especially like to hear from anyone living in Arizona, Texas, Montana or British Columbia, but please note that doesn't bar anyone living in any other state. Yours sincerely, and hopefully,

Eva (Brick) Sergeant.
Brooke Lane, Hook, W. Preston,
Lancashire, England.

Thanks, Eva. Mighty glad that yuh decided THRILLING RANCH STORIES was the best—'stead of jest one of—like yuh first said.

Looks like it is 'bout time for ole Tex tuh keep quiet, and jest let all these nice letters speak for themselves. But we're shore thankin' yuh one an' all.

Dear Tex:

Here is my coupon for membership in the good old BRANDING FIRE CLUB. I am sorry I can't be with you fellers and gals at this roundup as I am chasing health out here in the sunny Southwest.

Please put my brand on a few strays and mavericks and send some letters my way. I am a lonely old bachelor, age 38, 6 feet, brown hair and eyes. Weight 150. I can't ride very far from the home ranch, but I can write and will send a beautiful natural color picture to all who ask for one. Sincerely,

Paul Graves.
P. O. Box 676,
Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Dear Tex:

I would like to become a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. I like

(Continued on page 142)

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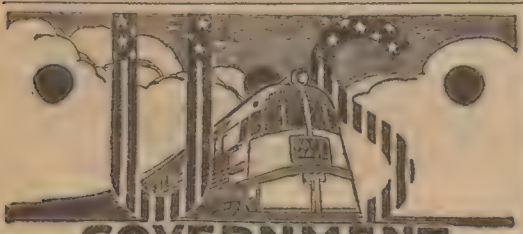

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(Continued from page 141)

THRILLING RANCH STORIES very much. Any pen pals from anywhere will be welcome, and I will answer all letters. I am 19 years of age, 5 feet 4 inches in height, 138 pounds, have dark hair and brown eyes. My favorite hobbies are reading, writing and all outdoor sports. Sincerely,

Eunice B. Adams.

685 Strathcona St.,
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Dear Tex:

I've been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES now for several months, and I will be pleased if you will enroll me as a member of your BRANDING FIRE CLUB.

I have not been long in this district and have not many pals, so I am hoping to hear from anyone who cares to write to me. I will answer all letters.

My favorite hobby is shooting, and I have won several cups and badges at it. I am also very fond of swimming and riding.

I also like the stories which have appeared so far, but unlike most people, I have no favorites. Well, I must sign off now to finish another story which is very interesting. I remain, Yours sincerely,

R. A. Smith.

"Avon Lodge,"
3 Park Lane, Fendalton,
Christchurch, New Zealand.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for quite some time and enjoy them very much. I received the membership card, Tex, and want to thank you for it.

I am 20 years of age, 5 feet 9 inches tall and weigh 140 pounds. I have brown hair and eyes. I like all kinds of sports and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over. I will answer all letters and exchange photos, if desired. So come along and send some letters my way.

Sincerely,

Frank Sandillo.

13 Club Road, Glen Cove,
Long Island, N. Y.

Wuth Knowin'

Sech fellas an' gals as them shore are wuth knowin' an' hope you-all'll send 'em answers an' make 'em feel welcome.

An' now fer our next number, fellas an' gals. Th' boss is givin' yuh RODEO QUEEN, a novel by Larry A. Harris, an' RAWHIDE GAP GUNSMOKE, a novelette by

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

Wilton West, an' HER FATHER'S GUNS, a novelette by Allan K. Echols, three writers who cain't noway be beat fer givin' yuh top-hand, real yarns. An' then a heap o' other stories that'll make yuh dig in yore rowels an' tell yore bronc tuh git lopin' fast, right 'side th' riders o' th' range what'll be with yuh in each story.

Ah'll be seein' yuh come next month, ev'rybody. Luck!

—TEX BROWN.

P. S.: A list of names of some of the members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB will appear in the next issue.

THE RIGHT TO LOVE

(Continued from page 135)

a manhunter for the Eagle Mining Company? Well, scalp-hunter, if what I hear is right, that Eagle Mine bunch practically stole that mine from Colton and the Wells family, and I'll be damned if I fer one blame Bob Colton for tryin' to get back what's rightfully his. I reckon you and yore buzzards will have to get along without a posse."

The man turned his back on Allen and went back downstairs, followed by the rest of the crowd.

Allen cursed. "Damn bunch of crooks themselves. All right, Shorty, go git Slim and light a shuck down to the Ruidoso Trail. And if you let Colton slip through your fingers again this time I'll make buzzard meat out of you myself. Git! I'll come along as soon as I get my leg bandaged. Rosa, would you help me?"

The girl bandaged Allen's leg and he joined his men down below. Outside, there was a sound of clattering hoofs in the night. It slowly died away in the distance, and then it was quiet.

The girl fell back down on her sofa and held her hand over her pale face, weak with nervousness.

(Continued on page 144)

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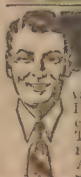

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During my 36 years of practice in functional conditions of women I developed this home method, which is described in my illustrated treatise sent FREE ON REQUEST. It discusses many subjects relating to the female organs and tells how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have who reported arrival of babies after being childless for years, and report as well satisfactory relief from the various female troubles amenable to correction by this home method. DR. H. W. J. L. ELDERS, 7th & Felix Sts., Suite 171-L ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI.

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(Continued from page 143)

Then suddenly she tensed, her delicate body rigid. She listened sharply. There came the sound of a scraping boot on the roof outside her door, then soft steps. And then a form framed in the doorway where the drapery had been before Allen's fall had torn it down.

The man standing there was young, lean-hipped, broad-shouldered. His youthful grey eyes were alert, looking at the girl hungrily.

The girl looked at him with wide, frightened eyes. Then just one word, like a little cry, escaped her lips.

"Bob!"

And then she was in his arms, lips clinging to his. Her soft fingers caressed his face as though to make sure he was really alive. Then she whispered fearfully, "You shouldn't have come. They've trailed you here, and there's a bunch of them looking for you."

"I got that idea," he grinned. "Somebody stole my horses while I was feedin' 'em, and I had to spend half an hour stealing them back. But I got them—both."

"Both?" she asked.

"Shore. I brought yore Betty Hoss along. Yuh're ridin' tonight. That is, if it's safe for you. Where are those hombres now? I heard 'em ride away."

"They would have been right here putting bullets into you if one of them hadn't smoked such awful smelling cigars," the girl said. "You see, I opened the drapery as a signal for you and then went downstairs. When I came back it was closed and the man named Allen was hidden behind it. I could smell the reek of his cigar. I knew it was him, so I told him that I was your enemy and that you wanted to kidnap me and take me down to Ruidoso. That made him take his men off the mountain trail and leave it clear for you."

Bob Colton had his face buried in

her hair. "Clear for both of us, honey. Rosa Wells, you're the greatest and the smartest little dove that a man ever had. If I was an outlaw by nature instead of necessity I'd have you working for me just the same. Yuh've been hanging around these dives to get information for me and protecting me for a year. But yore job's done.

"I've got the last of the Eagle gold. And there won't be any more. The vein ran out and the company's bankrupt. Which proves they shouldn't have stolen it from the Coltons and the Wells family in the first place. Let's go honey, we're through. Yore Betty Hoss is waiting to see yuh, and I'm hungry to get yuh alone up there where there's nobody but me to hear you sing and to watch you dance."

Down on the Ruidoso Trail three manhunters lay concealed, their rifles hungry for blood money, silent and menacing in the darkness.

Up on the mountain trail the boy and the girl rode side by side in the darkness, their work done, freedom and peace and love waiting for them. *La Paloma,* the Dove of the dance-halls, was no more. But Rosa Wells had earned the right to live, and to love.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

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A Novelette of Colt Courtship

By

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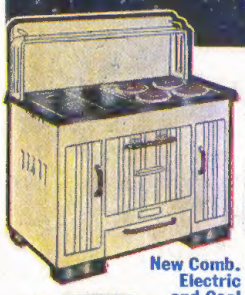

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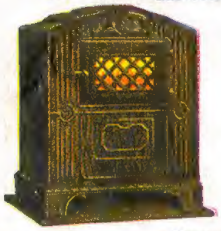

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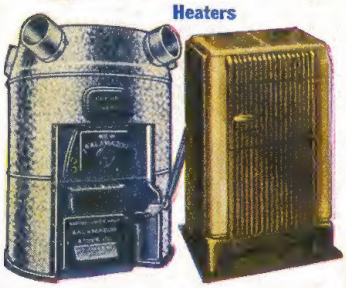

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